LANCER BOOKS 73-639 60¢

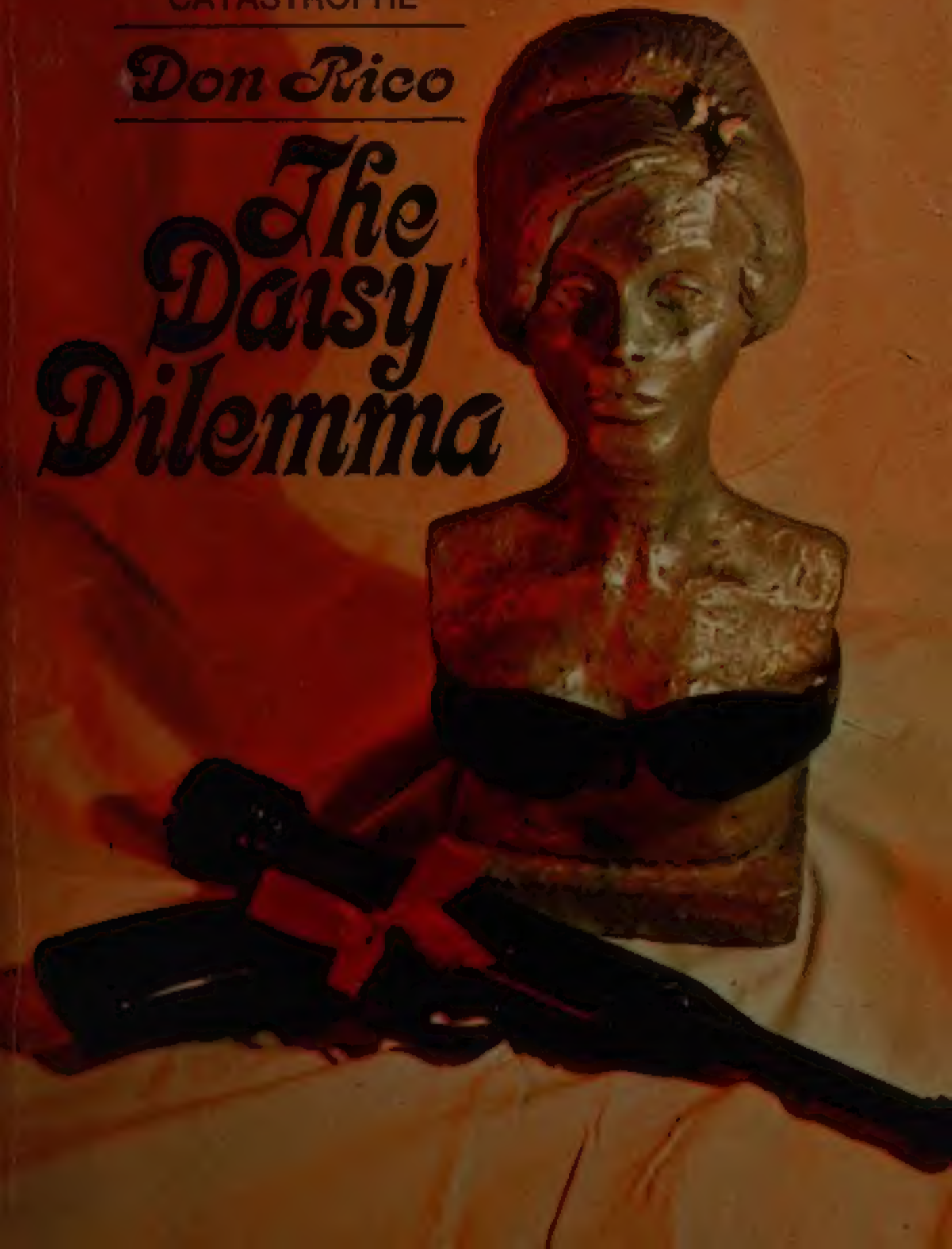
BUZZ CARDIGAN, THE LIMP-WRISTED

"Man From Pansy",

FINDS SPYING A DRAG
AS HE FOLLOWS A FLOWER
ON A TRAIL TO WORLD
CATASTROPHE

Don Rico

The Daisy Dilemma



No Room for a Spy

Man this was luxury!

My room had a view of the lake and the mountains and you could just as well die in it and figure you'd seen it all. I took a sip of my drink. It was refreshing and tingling.

If only I weren't here on a grim mission. But that's why I was here, a mile high in the sky, to chase a clown with a secret in his daffy head that could mean disaster to us if I didn't get to him before the other side did.

That's when I noticed the small envelope sticking through the opening at the bottom of the door. A note from Honeydew, thanking me for the ride? A welcoming gesture from the management? A bill for my first hour at the hotel?

Wishful thinking. The note read: *Lake Tahoe is no good for losers. And you're a loser, Buzz Cardigan. Get it?*

There was no signature, of course. An executioner never signs his name to a death notice.

This one is for:
Roger and Mary Pomposello
For laughs!

The Daisy Dilemma

Don Rico

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THE DAISY DILEMMA

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REPORT #1010

Confidential Report from Burgess (Buzz) Cardigan:

All right, gentlemen of the United States Counter-Intelligence Department, here it is. I'm giving it to you straight—straight, that is, unlike many of the characters I met on this assignment.

I've tried my damnedest to put this down in the regulation format as required by the Department, but I can't do it. My mind can't work that way—not when it's boggling because of a nest of homosexuals all bent on getting me—one way or another.

Hell, if you guys upstairs can decide I have to pass as a queer in order to do undercover work (no play on words intended), then I can be just as offbeat in my report.

So here it is, ready or not.

Fasten your safety belts, men! I know you're very toughened, having been through many strange, weird, macabre, impossible situations involving intrigue, double-crosses, murder, and outlandish sex. Sex, that is, in every shape, manner, and form.

But . . . are you ready for *this?*

I wasn't!

Heaven help the straight man on a night like this!

Burgess (Buzz) Cardigan
Special Agent on Assignment
Special Service Division
United States Counter-Intelligence Department

FILE ON JEBEDIAH OREGON:
Highly Confidential

Item One:

To: B. Cardigan
From: Personal Report Division
(TOP SECRET)

Subject: Jebediah Oregon. No middle initial.

Age, 35, looks younger. Blue eyes, thick blond hair, wears wispish mustache hanging over mouth to conceal prominent front teeth. Height, 5 feet, 11 inches; weight, 170 pounds, inclined to plumpishness. Has slight double chin but no distinguishing marks. Photo enclosed.

Much of this, of course, could be changed by now. Please take that into consideration.

Bachelor. No girlfriends. Lived with his mother until she died three years ago. Further report on Oregon's social life to follow.

Government Background:

Oregon was a research and experimental scientist working in California Laboratory with top secret material. Conducted much worthwhile experiments and was considered very loyal, having top security.

Latest work had to do with Experiment Inside. This has to do with development of far-traveling missile loaded with deadly germs. Obstacle in way of this development concerned destruction of germs along with exploding missile. Experiments conducted by Oregon were in the line of assuring explosion of missile without destruction of the germs.

It is suspected that Oregon discovered the way this could be done. It is also suspected that he never wrote his discovery into a formula, but kept it in his head.

(End of Item One)

Item Two:

To: B. Cardigan
From: Federal Bureau of Investigation
(TOP SECRET)

SUBJECT: *Jebediah Oregon*

On the morning of July 7, subject lost self-control while conducting experiments in his laboratory. He began to scream and cry out hysterically. Was seized by his associates but he broke away and ran off.

Report is that his words followed this pattern: "I will not turn my formula over to the Government! The militarists will use it to conduct germ warfare! No one will have it!"

Associates tried to tell him that the formula would not be used for that purpose. But he called them liars and tools of empire and drowned them out with his screams. Doctor was called in to administer sedatives to subject. But subject had vanished, eluding all attempts to head him off.

Search was conducted of subject's apartment and all his known haunts to no success. He abandoned everything he owned, clothing, furniture, car, etc. It is known, however, that he withdrew his savings of ten thousand dollars from a branch of the Bank of America.

It is definite that he can be located nowhere in the City of Los Angeles. Agents are conducting searches for him in all large cities; there is a general alarm out for subject.

SUB REPORT: Subject is trustworthy but something happened to make his mind crack. The United States Government has no intention of using the formula discovered by subject; it would have been kept in secret files forever to use in working on an antidote should an

enemy power invent the same formula. Subject, however, would not accept this as basic fact or truth.

(End of Item Two)

Item Three:

To: B. Cardigan
From: U.S. Secret Service
(HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL)

SUBJECT: *Jebediah Oregon*

Counter-espionage source, thoroughly reliable, reports that an Iron Curtain agent has informed his employers of the existence and nature of subject. There is every reason to believe that subject is now the goal also of these employers and their agents.

Should subject be located first by our opponents, they could force him to reveal the formula through the use of serums and brain-washing. In short, the search for subject is now a race between the Government of the United States and our foes. We must find him before they do. Repeat: *We must find him before they do.*

Our aim is *not* to take the formula from him or to employ it.

We are most anxious to prevent the enemy from obtaining it. For this reason subject must be located as quickly as possible so that he may be kept under protective custody.

Free, he is as much a menace as anyone with a finger on the button.

(End of Item Three)

Item Four:

To: B. Cardigan
From: Personal Report Division
(TOP SECRET)

In Re: *Jebediah Oregon*

Subject has been able to keep one aspect of his personal life secret from the Government. A bachelor all his life, he had no true social life. After he fled in a state of hysteria, it was discovered that subject was and still is homosexual.

Evidently, this side of his nature never interfered with his work or his patriotic loyalty as an American. It is felt, however, that his perversion can be utilized by the enemy in obtaining the formula from him. Secret nature was revealed by a diary kept by him and found in his apartment. No entries, however, are able to help us locate his present whereabouts or identity of his paramours since no names, dates or places were revealed as such.

One revealing fact is known through his notations: He is lascivious in his homosexual needs and *cannot exist without a sexual encounter for longer than three days.* At the end of that time, if he has gone without sex, he will go to any extremes to obtain satisfaction. This may be of help to us.

Another item: Subject has a trademark copied, in a sense from the sunflower worn by the author Oscar Wilde, one of his idols. Wilde was a notorious homosexual ruined because of his affair with Lord Douglas. He wore the sunflower as a proud mark of his sexual independence.

Subject, in imitation of Wilde, wears a daisy in his lapel whenever he is on a sexual prowl. He also affects the feminine name of Lulu because, as he states it, whatever Lulu wants, Lulu gets, and it's a lulu! Those are his words, B.C., for sure.

Good luck!

(End of Item Four)

Item Five:

To: B. Cardigan
From: Files Copy, Secret Service
(Restricted Information)

SUBJECT: *Jebediah Oregon*

Enclosed is photocopy of note mailed to Federal Bureau of Investigation. Handwriting is that of subject.

Sirs:

Please do not try to look for me. I shall have vanished from the face of the earth. When I discovered that I had within my brain the means by which the most horrendous and terrifying type of warfare could be wrought upon humanity, I was shocked to a point where I wanted to kill myself so that my knowledge would die with me.

I do not intend to make this knowledge available even to my own country. There is no telling what awful forces could get hold of it and use it to destroy not only enemy soldiers, but innocent old people, women, children, and other civilians. This type of germ warfare would not be confined to battle areas; it would spread to all areas in a never-ending plague of death, disease, and destruction.

I want no part of it. Neither do I intend to see it fall into the hands of foreign powers. I have always regretted the creation of the atom bomb and its dire consequences. This is not a fit manner of dealing with humanity in this, the Twentieth Century, when mankind should strive to use its knowledge for the common good rather than the common and uncommon destruction of itself.

I have no trust in the human factors involved in the structure of any government—ours as well as the enemy's.

So—a plague on all your houses! But it shall not be a plague visited upon humanity by any discovery of mine!

I am a man of shrewd intelligence. I know how to vanish so that I will never be found.

Be forewarned: should I suspect for one moment that agents are closing in on me, that I am even being sought, I shall see to it that my revenge shall be swift, damaging

. . . and sweet. It will mean that my wishes are not respected, just as I now suspect that my wish not to have my discovery of germ warfare used for war will not be respected.

Let me live out my life in peace. And when I die, let my knowledge die with me. It is for the good of us all. There are too many forces of destruction already loose in the world.

Sincerely
Jebediah Oregon

(End of Item Five)

Item Five:

To: B. Cardigan
From: Special Service Division
United States Counter-
Intelligenc Dept.

SUBJECT: *Jebediah Oregon*

This file contains all the facts (including a photo) on subject that you need to know.

Study, absorb, and *destroy*.

You will retain the identity assumed during your previous assignment.

You are still officially discharged from USCI and will remain under that cover until further notice.

ASSIGNMENT: *Find Jebediah Oregon before the enemy finds him.*

That is all.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday's child is fair of face

1. Monday, July 10, 1 p. m.; Location Secret

EVFRYTHING BAD happens to me on a Monday. First of all, and let's start this off right, I was born on a Monday. If that's not bad enough, have another: being a Monday child, I am fair of face.

That's right. I'm a pretty boy. Me, Buzz Cardigan, with the body of a bull and the soul of a tiger—I am cursed with a face that is a combination of the best features of Tony Curtis, Rock Hudson, and Cary Grant. Only prettier.

And what does that make me?

Frustrated, that's what it makes me!

Because, having a face that attracts faggots like bees to honey, I am assigned by Counter-Intelligence to ferret out the gay boys who betray our government.

Now I ask you, is that any assignment for a red-blooded (not to mention hot-blooded) American boy who digs chicks? I don't think so. But Counter-Intelligence thinks so, and so does Lawrence Griffin, my chief. So who am I to argue? Buzz Cardigan, that's who!

"No! No! No!" I growled for the hundredth time.

But all Griffin did was nod his head.

Want to hear Item Two about my bad Mondays? This meeting was taking place on a Monday, just a short while after I had broken my back and my manly pride on a

wild case. Sure, I'd had a respite; after mixing it up with the wildest, nuttiest, most outlandish gang of queers imaginable, they had given me a few days off so I could restore my manhood via a certain chick yclept Beverly Tyler. Well, I don't like to make puns but I sure tied one on Miss Tyler.

But it wasn't enough, damn it! I was just getting warmed up, just getting my second wind with Bev when I got this call to meet Lawrence Griffin at a secret spot.

When Griff calls, you hop, man! No matter what you're doing, you quit and get right to it. So I kissed the soft but pliant lips of Beverly Tyler, promised her I'd be right back to take up where I'd left off (that would be on her left breast, as I remember), and departed for my rendezvous with Griff.

"Not again, Mr. Griffin!" I protested, my mind and body still heated from contact with Bev.

"Look, Buzz."

Griffin leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees, his eyes hard on me. To look at him, you'd have to take him for a guy-next-door, a nice, simple, even-featured and even-tempered middle-class guy. Actually, he was just the opposite. He was the beast in the cage next to the gorilla. I don't mean he was a senseless animal; what he was was a single-purposed hombre who'd bring a spy in with his bare hands if he couldn't do it with cunning. He was well-equipped in all departments. And he was not only my boss, he was my best friend and the guy I owed my life to several times over.

"Protest all you want," he said. "But you're going to do the job and you're going to do it well."

"But it means tracking down a queer!" I kept protesting. "I've had my fill of them, thank you!"

"You did it before, Buzz, and you can do it again."

I moaned. He was right, of course. At the risk of appearing immodest, I had to admit that when it came to dealing with the nether world of daisydom, I was the

best. I had the flair, that certain something known as homo-bait, that made them think I was one of them.

Truth to tell, Griff and the Department had planted the illusion well. I had been drummed out of the Service on the charge of being a homosexual, of having conducted an affair with Pete Blake, formerly of the State Department in Washington. He'd been booted, too, but actually we were still on the job, still working for the protection and safety of America and its Citizens. I just wished they'd picked someone else to do that kind of protecting. It wasn't a hell of a lot of fun defending yourself against fags while dueling with the country's enemies.

But the scheme had worked once and, as Griff said, it could work again.

But if I took on this assignment, it meant a fate worse than death. It meant that not only could I not swing with chicks, I would have to pretend I was making it with guys! And if that wasn't enough to scare away prospective females, not to mention what it would do to my rep as a man, it'll do until hell comes along.

"But how am I going to find this guy Jebediah Oregon?" I asked. "Hell, I know the Hollywood and beach fag scene better than anyone, and I've never come across him yet. So how am I going to pull this caper when he decides he's going to make himself even scarcer than usual?"

"I'll tell you what," said Griffin. "You don't tell me how to run my job and I won't tell you how to run yours. How's that?"

"Thanks for nothing."

"You're welcome."

Griffin got up, stretched, and moved to a table where he had thoughtfully deposited some Scotch, some ice, and a pitcher of water. One thing about Griff, he always did a thorough job. He also knew that the way to a man's heart was through his gills.

Mixing us a couple, he went on talking:

"It's a race, buddy boy. A race between us and them as to who gets to Oregon first." He leered back at me over his shoulder. "Do you want they should beat us out, Buzz?"

"Oh, come on; stop challenging me."

I glowered while I waited for my drink. And as I glowered, my mind went black. I mean I got mean. So when he handed me my drink I took a deep swallow and was ready for my ace in the hole, my needle-sharp thrust that would bring him to his knees and order me off the case.

"Mr. Griffin," I said gently, "now I'll tell *you* what. All right, suppose I take this case."

"Yes?" he purred, tilting his glass upward.

"Statistics show that not all homos are born that way. A goodly percentage of them become deviates through contact, through constant association. Isn't that right?"

"I suppose so," he shrugged. "Statistics aren't in my line."

"Be that as it may. How would you like it, Mr. Griffin —I repeat, how would you like it if, through my hanging out with fags on these mashugana cases of yours that you insist I work on—how would you like it if after a while I got to *like* it!"

Griffin's eyebrows arched. "You mean—?"

"Exactly!" I had him scared and reeling, so I plunged in for the coup de grâce. After all, it wouldn't have been merciful to make him suffer too long. "It might happen, you know. Some of those lads are damned beautiful, and I'm only human. Who knows? There could come some dark and balmy night and I'd be tangling with one of them and I would have been a celibate too long, and—"

I let it dangle. Griffin was deliberating. His lower lip pouted and his brows were furrowed as he studied the floor. He looked up after a long, long time and smiled.

"Well, Buzz," said the rat. "We can't all be perfect.

Now shall we get down to cases and stop fooling around? The enemy may have caught up to our man while we sit here and fence with one another."

I'm here to tell you you can't win with this guy.

We got down to cases. That is, Griffin did. I only listened. And sulked. And said goodbye to Beverly Tyler and every other lovely, available, and talented chick.

I hope the great masses of America realize what I have to go through just so they can watch television every night, get hangovers, take on more bills and debts, and go to ball games.

Maybe I'll get back to broads one day, I reflected as I listened to my chief. Maybe . . . in some other incarnation!

"Your cover will be the same as in the last case," he said, all business as usual while a man died before his very eyes. "Pete Blake is still your unrequited lover, the one you can't visit in Washington. He's also the one you phone and deliver messages to in the usual code. He will then communicate with me."

That was my role in life. Pete and I were supposed to be in love; that was why we were supposed to have been kicked out of our jobs; that was why I wasn't supposed to see him, because being in love with him gave me the cover of a bearer of a torch, a fag who wouldn't shack up with any other man because I was still pining for Pete and no one else.

Pretty? Well, listen! It's a job. What do *you* do for a living, play piano in a whorehouse?

"We've arranged for a local contact for you," Griffin went on. "Just in case you need help in a real hurry."

"Or want to make a fast will and testament?"

"His name is Mister Jay."

"A bird?"

"A hair cutter and dresser in one of Beverly Hills' most fashionable barber shops. He lisps, and his voice is high-pitched. But don't let that fool you. He's one of us."

"Good! Why don't you let *him* do this caper?"

"Because he's nowhere as pretty as you, Buzz."

I frowned and glared at my drink. "You sure know how to hurt a guy, you know that?"

Griffin handed me a slip of paper with a phone number on it. I glanced at the number and set a match to the paper, watching it burn into a dead ash on an ashtray. It could have been me; puph! A small life dying without a trace.

"We found a lot of junk in Oregon's apartment," Griffin said. "This was among it."

Now he handed me another goodie: a matchbook cover. It was the usual stock cut, a drawing of a bartender leering happily at you from across the bar, a something that was supposed to be a champagne cocktail bubbling at you from one corner of the cover, stuff like that.

That was on one side. I turned to the flip side and was told in living black and red on white: *The One and Only, the Original—Ossie's Place.* Plus an address off Main Street near Fifth in downtown L.A.

I peered at Griffin. "Ossie's Place? Like Ossie for Oscar? Like in Oscar Wilde?"

"Dunno. We checked it out, of course. Couldn't find a thing. Nobody heard of our boy Oregon. We failed. But who are we to succeed? We all look like cops or something. You don't, Buzz. You'll succeed, won't you?"

"Or die trying?" I asked with what I hoped was a sarcastic edge to my voice.

Griffin chose to disregard it. Just as he chose to disregard every other protestation I had made. He is certainly a dedicated man. And so, come to think of it, am I.

I had taken an oath to serve my country through the offices of Counter-Intelligence, come danger, come personal feelings, come hell and high water and all the valleys in between. That meant I was ready to give my life in order to do my job properly.

All right—take my life. Send me off to war with a

peashooter in my hands to fight enemy soldiers and I'll do it willingly. But . . . isn't abstaining from women something that is over and beyond the call of duty?

Hell, the world is filled with broads. Look out your window. Take a walk down the street. Any street. And there they are—by the millions! Young and healthy, in the full bloom of bosomhood, eyes radiant and sparkling, mouths red and slightly open for your kiss, supple waists ready to bend to the force of your arms, long thighs anxious to intertwine with yours while sparks fly and fireworks explode . . .

And where am I while all this la-de-dahing is going on? Out chasing queers, out making eyes at them, out making believe I'm one of them, out of it all, that's what I'm out!

Griffin stirred me out of my limbo by getting snappily to his feet.

"That's all, Buzz," he said.

I set my glass down slowly and stood up, too. We were eye to eye. "You're sure?" I asked.

"That's all," he repeated. Then his steady gaze flickered. "Except for one thing."

"Yes?" I asked hopefully.

For the first time since I've known him, I saw Griffin hesitate and fumble. "Buzz, you . . . you won't . . . will you? I mean, could you?"

"Would I, could I what?"

"Go *that* way?"

I swear the guy was almost sick about it. I mean he had actually half-believed me when I said that constant contact with queers might turn me into one.

"Of course not," I replied, feeling sorry as hell for [redacted]

"Whew! Thank goodness. I'd hate to lose a good agent."

The bastard! I allowed a sneer to curl my cupid-bow lips.

"Look at it this way." I said. "You may lose an agent, but you will have gained a girlfriend."

"Always with the wisecracks, eh? Get out of here, Buzz. Me, I'm going to stay here and finish off what's left of this jug. Maybe it'll help me forget for a little while what kind of job I'm sending you on."

"Lucky you that you can forget. Me, I've got to live with it until I find Jebediah Oregon." I strode to the door and stopped to look back at him. He was filling his glass. To the brim.

I resisted the impulse to make a parting crack.

Even armchair generals die a little when they send their men out to do combat. Well, from the looks of that glass of booze, Mr. Lawrence Griffin was going to die happy.

2. *Monday, July 10, 3:30 p.m.; Rexall Drug Store Phone Booth*

The bright and hot Hollywood sun made me feel my one drink a little more than usual. Was it that or had I exhausted myself with Beverly Tyler? Ugh! Ugly thought! Such a situation was impossible.

As I drove up Highland to Hollywood Boulevard the very thought of her brought strange tinglings to what is referred to as my loins. And that, brother, is not exhaustion. Far, far from it, I'm afraid.

Oh, well . . .

I turned right on Hollywood and found a parking space right kerplunk in front of the Hollywood Sporting Goods Store. I resisted the impulse to go in and browse amid the dry and wet flies. I needed more fishing gear like a hole in my head beside the one I already had. I was already stocked with enough lines and flies that I would never get a chance to duck into a High Sierra stream.

Unless I forgot about assignments and sex, anyway. And that was hardly likely.

I turned my back on the tackle shop and crossed the street to the Rexall Drug Store on the corner. A balding, tight-pantsed pansy was browsing among the paperbacks and looked around at me as if by instinct. I tossed my head disdainfully and went on to the phone booth.

Duty called. I had a few numbers to dial.

Baby Lou was first. He/she is a swish who is my good friend and who would like to graduate into the intimate-friend class. No dice, of course. True, he had been very helpful to me when I had to run down a ring of faggots who were blackmailing helpless queers for the Castro cause. And he had a crush on me that wouldn't quit.

He was more than anxious to be of help to me.

"Darling!" he exclaimed in that Tallulah voice of his. "Where have you *been!?!* I'm simply *crushed* that I haven't heard from you! Oh, you've forgotten all about your faithful little Baby Lou, and here I've been *dragging* my weary but cute bottom about on this simply *fabulous* drag show out at the Purple People Eater out in Redondo! And straining my baby blues looking for you in the audience. But are you there? *No!*"

"I've been busy," I said when I could get a word in.

"Busy, busy, busy! Oh, you little bee, you—sipping nectar where you may! Listen! We're dark tonight, it being Monday and all. But I'm giving a gay little party at my pad. It'll be swinging and all. I've even got a batch of LSD. If you're not in that bag, I've latched onto grass, fresh from TeeJay, no less. If not that, we can always groove it with bananas—"

"Baby, listen, for God's sake!"

"I'm all ears, honey. And all body, too. Will you be there?"

"I'm looking for somebody." I had to talk quick or he'd cut me off with more make-talk. "A gay lad who goes by the name of Lulu."

"I know a colored swish named Lulu. He's about sixteen and fresh in from Chicago. You want to swing with him, Buzz? I can arrange it if you let me join the party—"

"Hold it!" I barked.

"*Ooooh!* I'd *love* to!"

I gritted my teeth. "Your Lulu isn't the one I'm looking for. This one is in his early thirties and he's white. Know him?"

"I'm afraid not, dear. Gee, you sound mad. Are you mad?"

I took a long shot and a big chance. "Know a homo called Jebediah Oregon?"

"*Who-o-o-o?*"

I sighed wearily and repeated the name.

"No!" squealed Baby Lou. "But I'd *love* to! *Jebediah Oregon!* What a *gas!* Tell you what I'll do, lover; I'll ask around if you want me to."

"I want you to. But discreetly, Baby Lou."

"You know me, honey. The soul of discretion. How do you think I've lasted this long without getting busted? My *goodness*, dearie, you're talking to an old pro—I mean a young pro."

"I'll check with you later."

"Tonight? At my place?"

"I don't know about tonight, Baby Lou. I wouldn't bank on it."

"A girl can dream, can't she? I'll never give up, Buzzy. Simply never, never, *never!* Do you hear me?"

"Are you bucking for an Academy Award nomination?"

"I'm bucking for you, love."

"I'll get in touch with you, Baby Lou."

"Ooooh! *Do* that!"

I hung up, wondering how that swish could give a double entendre to everything anyone said.

I made a few more calls. Net result: nothing.

Jebediah Oregon, maidenly name, Lulu, had not only

vanished after making the germ-missile discovery, he had even disappeared *before* that!

The balding fairy was still at the book rack when I went past on my way out. This time he tossed *his* head. And whispered, loud enough for me to hear: "*Suffer!*"

And, thinking of Beverly, waiting in her hot little bed, I said to myself, "If you only knew, sister! If you only knew!"

CHAPTER TWO

There is some soul of goodness in things evil
Shakespeare: *King Henry V*

1. Monday, July 10, 4 p.m.; the Hollywood Hills

I've got this pad, see? It's groovy in every way, a small place strictly for a loner, an A-frame up on one of the more remote roads of the Hollywood Hills. According to the cover I maintain, it's paid for by my ever-absent lover, Pete Blake. Actually, of course, the Secret Service pays for it, along with my wages. The latter is another item that's supposed to be furnished me by Pete.

I drove up the partly paved road, twisting along with the curves, tooling my Triumph along easily, trying not to hurry, trying to think. And reminding myself of a fact or two.

Have some: My cover is that I'm a queer longing for his absent lover. I'm also faithful to him; this keeps the fags panting, but they also respect my wishes. So no one is ever allowed to visit me at home. It's supposed to be a shrine to my missing lover.

True, a couple of people did visit my pad. One I had to batter to a pulp with my fists. This was a man. The other I battered to a sweet, soft jellyroll with my body. This was a woman, the aforementioned Beverly Tyler.

Beverly Tyler!

I almost went off the shoulder and over the cliff. My God, I had forgotten all about her. And here I was, mak-

ing a dozen phone calls to the gay boys, planning my rather macabre evening, and all without a thought to a girl who was lying nude, waiting for my return to her outstretched arms and panting bosom!

I swung back onto the road and shot the Triumph up to the house. It took me two seconds flat to open the door and scoop up the phone.

"Yes?" Have you ever heard the sound of ice?

"Bev, honey! This is Buzz—"

"Who?" Ice in a dank cave, that is.

"Come on, cut that out! I know you're mad at me, but I can explain everything. No, I mean you'll have to take my word for it. Damn, I can't explain anything at all."

"Good!"

And click! And buzzzzzzzzz . . . I was holding a dead phone and staring at it like a goof. Smart Buzz Cardigan, eh? Best operator in the local HQ of CI, eh? What do you do now, idiot?

The smartest thing I could do at that point was to hang up. I'd get to Beverly later. If she was still around. As I stripped on my way to the shower, I had to remind myself that this was Hollywood. This was where women and sex waited for no man. There was just too much good stuff floating around, male and female, for anybody to sit around and pine. There's always another streetcar named Desire coming along any minute.

Yep, friends, this is the big leagues. If you don't have what it takes, they'll find out in no time and you're back in the bush, your only memory that of the one time you stepped up to the plate with the bases loaded and struck out.

I turned the shower water to cold. I had to do something to try to forget that Beverly Tyler is one of the classiest chicks around, what with that non-quitting frame with the large but firm breasts, those splendid shoulders, that tapering waist, those svelte hips with their hidden

promise of untold delights and perfumed chambers. Not to mention her talent!

Damn, the water wasn't cold enough. I was still thinking of her. You see, the last time I had showered was that same morning, and it was at her place, and we were in the shower together. . . .

I told you she had talent!

But it was only in my memory now. Among my dozens of orders was the one which like to have killed me. I wasn't to tell anyone, neither male nor female, family or friend or whatever, that I was anything but a pansy.

I rubbed myself more vigorously with the soap and washcloth. Of course, my go-round with Beverly had been a lapse. She could give me away any time she wanted. But I had a feeling she wouldn't tell.

Why did I have this feeling? I closed my eyes and remembered.

"Darling," she had said to me, looking down at me from that dizzy height as she leaned over me, her hair wild around her head, her eyes soft and smouldering, her shoulders hunched up, her breasts swaying spasmodically from side to side and up and down—"Darling," she had said, "I'll never tell any girl about you . . . about how good you are . . . how delicious . . . how skillful! My goodness! They'd surround your pad by the hundreds of thousands, demanding a piece of the action! And I don't intend to share one little piece of you with anyone! Not one little teeny-weeny piece. Oooooh! You're marvelous!"

And who am I to argue with a statement like that?

But now—goodbye to all that, at least until I got this case wrapped up. *If* I got it wrapped up. *If* I lived through it.

I was getting dressed when I got that peculiar feeling. No, not the one you're thinking about. It's that small trembling at the top of my chest, that fluttering sensa-

tion between the eyes, the sudden tingling of every small nerve in my body!

It's fear, that's what it is. Plain, unadulaterated fear. The premonition of disaster you get when you're as well-trained an agent as I am, the tiny echo that warns you to be careful, Buzz, this may be it.

This may be when you stop getting lucky. This may be when you move one split second too slowly—or too fast, and something hits you for good. It's happened to other guys, guys as good or better than you are. One swift second of error and it's over and the bad guys have won. And where are you? Oblivious to the small but sincere tokens of tribute paid you by your comrades-in-arms while you wait out eternity in a box smaller than a phone booth.

I shivered. Yep, there it was, the warning. It was not an immediate sense of danger; that is to say, no one was lurking about outside ready to slug me and there wasn't anyone in the pad about to pounce on me, crying, "Surprise, you're dead!"

But it was out there in that great big world, maybe in the dark of the night that would be upon us in a few hours. Up to this point I hadn't taken the Jebediah Oregon case too seriously. Hell, he was just a scared jackrabbit heading for the hills to get away from a love affair, perhaps.

Perhaps . . .

I zipped up my dirty Levis. Yes, I said Levis. Dirty ones. I was also wearing a pair of beat-up sneakers that hadn't been in good shape since the Year One, but which I kept for sentimental reasons. And I was wearing a foul sweatshirt and a hand-me-down Eisenhower jacket too far gone to give to the Good Will people. And I hadn't shaved, either.

Get the picture? I was in disguise, that's what.

I was about to hie me downtown to Skid Row around Main and Fifth. And I meant to get lost in the crowd of

scavengers, drunks, pimps, hustlers, male and female prostitutes and whatever.

My destination was Ossie's Place; object: find Jebediah Oregon, alias Lulu. And I looked exactly what I wanted to appear, a cheap, good-looking young queer on the prowl for a sympathetic older man to take under his wing and into his bed.

Somebody, for instance, like Jebediah Oregon . . .

2. *Monday, July 10, 5:30 p.m.; Pershing Square*

I took my time getting downtown. I knew there'd be very little action among the poorer set of fags until the sun went down. Night was the prowling time, night was the shadow that covered shame and depravity, night made everyone and everything equal.

Even now they were preparing, girding their loins for the endless crawling and searching, whipping up their imaginations in the hope that this would be the time, this would be the night when the ultimate would be reached and they would find meaning in the paths they had chosen.

The horrendous thought was enough to stagger even *my* mind . . . and I've seen everything. Queer orgies, screaming transvestites, old men mauling young boys and vise versa, the rich humbling themselves slavishly before the penniless, because this was a new charge, a fresh jolly, an untried approach.

I didn't bother with the Freeway; I took Western over to Wilshire and then turned downtown. It was the slower way, but I wasn't in any hurry to face what I knew I would find.

In my last report I told about how I feel about the third sex. It was in my conversation with Griffin when he handed me my first assignments having to do with the pansy set. Here it is:

"Chicks. I like chicks. I dig them not only the most but

the only. Mind you, I've got nothing against homosexuals. I'm no kind of prude. All I say is let them have their own life and let me have mine. I won't tell them how to swing as long as they don't tell me. And I've known a few around town, decent and regular men, responsible citizens, too, who contribute a great deal to the community. They keep their sex life where it belongs, in privacy. There are others who flaunt it. Hell, that's okay by me too. It's been with us a long time and society might as well accept it and get used to it, make it okay between consenting adults and stop all this nonsensical and immature torture of a way of life that's been with us one hell of a long time and will be with us until the last gasp."

Well, that's how I feel. So I've got nothing against their way of indulging in sex. The only bother is that, as in every other walk of life, there are the vultures who take advantage. I'm talking about the child molesters, the blackmailers, the evil creeps. And the spies.

The spies . . .

Ah, there's the rub. Those are what I deal with. The spies who nail a queer who's in an important governmental position and work a way where he will betray honor, pride and country because they've got the goods on his sexual abberation.

Oh, hell! I braked to a stop at the red light at the corner of Western and Beverly Boulevard, glowering at nothing, my mind seething with anger. What a nutty, mixed-up world. You'd think that after centuries of civilization we'd have gotten to a point where humans knew how to live with one another. Instead we're in a jungle where beast claws at beast, where only the strong and the ruthless survive, where wars are fought without purpose and where monsters lurk in the shadows, waiting for the warriors to kill off one another so they'll be able to step in and devour the remains, like the jackals they are.

"My!" purred a voice in the car to my right. "You look so beautiful when you're mad!"

I whipped my head around. There he was, the balding queen from Rexall's Drug Store. He was at the wheel of a gray Rolls and smiling at me with capped teeth.

I was still gaping at him, surprised to see him, wondering whether he was on my trail, wondering if he was the reason for my premonition of fear, when a horn blasted behind me. The light had changed.

Baldy kept pace with me. "Want to stop for a drink and a chat?" he called out. The guy didn't give a damn if the whole world knew what he was up to.

"I'm busy," I called back. "Some other time, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind, sweets. How about tomorrow at Rexall's? Say at two o'clock?"

"Sure," I replied.

And I turned left on the next block. I had to get rid of the guy. If he was only a casual character, that would be easy. If not, then he'd be on my tail regardless, wanting to know what I was up to, where I was going, etc.

But he didn't stay with me. I made a few more simple turns that anyone could have followed if he wanted to. But he went on his own way, relishing, I was sure, the prospect of tomorrow.

After all, I was supposed to be quite a dainty dish to set before a queen!

I parked the Triumph at a lot blocks away from the center of the gay world of downtown. I was playing the role of a down-at-the-heels male prostie; it wouldn't do to show I owned and drove a brand new set of wheels of that calibre.

Then I started to walk along Main Street. I fell into a surly slouch, my head hunched down my neck toward my chest. I dragged my feet, but I also managed to give just the slightest hint of swish in my walk so that my hips rolled and my bottom wiggled.

I'm telling you, an agent's lot is not a happy one!

I got the looks, all right. They were there, all of them on the prowl: big men and little men, clean-shaven and scruffy, business-suited and overalled; guys looking for a quick break before heading home to the little woman out in suburbia; Hollywood sharpies trying to score away from their own stamping grounds; old men hoping to grasp one last flash or rejuvenation via a boy's spasmodic embrace; cynics wanting only brute sex without the involvements of the female; hard-eyed kids from farm country, faces pocked with dirt, hair tangled, seeking a fast buck in exchange for the use of their bodies by men; men with dead faces and intense eyes, looking for strangeness that would bring color back to their parched flesh; little, pudgy clerks and mechanics, wanting to taste the forbidden, wanting the dirty books to come to life just for them.

They moved like silent ghosts, eyes digging in search, seeking out that brief glance of recognition and acknowledgment and assent. But I passed them all by. No one who looked even remotely like Jebediah Oregon was among these dregs.

Pershing Square was just as hopeless. Here is an island in the midst of downtown Los Angeles, a haven for greenery and for birds. And for bums, for winos, for derelicts, for homeless girls stinking with the need of a bath, for preachers without pulpits, for the restless frightened ones moving in the crowds for a quick grab and a hasty feel, for young male prostitutes . . .

Hey! That's me!

I was leaning against a fence railing, trying to straighten out a mangled cigarette when I realized someone was standing in front of me.

"Hey, get out of the way, man," I said. "You're blocking the sun, and I'm cold."

"This," growled a voice, "is my terrain. Get the hell off it."

Only he didn't say hell. I looked up from my cigarette. Oh, he had the build to go with the rough voice, all right. Big, muscular, the body of a truck driver topped by the face of an infant. I mean he was about nineteen, with blond curly hair adorning his head like a wreath and a halo, and the face of a Raphael angel.

But not the eyes, however. They were dirty mean. And his fists were clenched. And he was breathing heavily with a whistling sound that came up from his massive chest.

I was aware that we were being watched, of course. All the rest of the jetsam had aimed their eyes at us to see what would happen. So here I was, barely two minutes into Pershing Square and already on the spot.

I blinked my baby blue eyes at Big Boy. "Why should I leave?"

"Didn't you hear me? This is my territory, buddy. Find yourself another spot to squat on. Any John that comes by here is mine, and no sweet-faced dirty doll like you's gonna take my trade away from me."

So there you have it. They come in and they stake out claims just like in the old days of the West. I didn't want his damned spot, of course. But I had to stay in character. If I didn't, the word would spread that I was a fraud. Well, I was that, all right, but I didn't relish anyone knowing it.

So I put away my mangled butt, lifted my head high in pansy defiance, and said, "Oh, keep your old terrain, anyway! Who'd want any John that'd like you?"

That, my friends, did it. Did I say he had the body of a truck driver? Strike that. Make it the body of a bull. Because that was exactly what he turned into when he lowered his head and charged into me . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Wait till the moon shines, Nellies!

1. Monday, July 10, 6:00 p.m.; Pershing Square

I COULD HAVE killed him.

That's what I'm trained for; it's part of my profession. I can kill with a gun, with a knife, with a rope, with my hands. I can kill instantly and so my enemy won't feel a thing. And I hate it. Even in self-defense, when it's my life or his, I hate it.

I could have finished off Big Boy with a chop to a vital spot that would have sent him into limbo forever. And of course I could have administered a coup de grâce to merely render him senseless for a while.

But I could not do either of these skillful executions. Doing so would have betrayed me as more than just a slouch waiting for a pickup. I had to make myself look bad; but I also had to make sure the baby-face gorilla didn't maim me.

He was coming at me head down, legs churning, fists clenched. And right at the pit of my stomach. I took it. I let him have at me. Of course, I doubled up a bit and tensed my stomach muscles to absorb the shock. But he

Brother, how he hit me! Even with all my powers of resistance, I felt one hell of a shock. I "ooophed!" and "ughed!" and fell back hard against the railing and over it.

I landed rolling and got to my feet. Big Boy was scrambling over the railing toward me. He had a look of enjoying every second of this and looking forward to more. There's a strong streak of the sadist in a lot of these big rough-trade guys, but this guy had more of it than usual. He was *all* sadist!

But he wasn't going to get his kicks at *my* expense.

I pretended fright as he charged some more, and fell to one side awkwardly. At least, I hoped it looked awkward for the benefit of the spectators. Actually, what I was doing was letting him have it with one seemingly flailing open hand.

The edge of my hand chopped right where I wanted, right on his Adam's apple. I felt the small bone structure collapse until there was only the flesh of his thick throat.

He made a very strange, guttural, and sickening noise as he went down. I made a business of regaining my equilibrium and looked down at him. He was out cold, but he would be all right, a little weaker if not a little wiser, maybe, but all right.

The crowd of hustlers gaped at me in amazement. I'm not small, mind you. A shade over six feet and about a hundred and seventy pounds. But I'm on the lean side and Big Boy was just that—big. All over.

Some of the crowd had admiration for me in the way they looked. But some, heaven help me, appeared as if they wanted to test me a bit further. What had been a ring of spectators was rapidly turning into a circle of drooling wolves, ready to pounce and join in on a feast of blood.

Not *my* blood!

I saw a cop over past the crowd. He was looking in my direction with an intent scowl and was about to make his way over. I wanted no part of him nor of the crowd.

"Cheese it!" I whispered harshly. "The fuzz!"

I didn't wait to see if the others scattered. I did some fast scattering of my own. There was a clump of bushes

behind me; I vanished into that and through it and out into the street. I dodged a few cars, ducked between some parked cars, onto the sidewalk and into an alleyway.

What had I accomplished? Nothing, you could say. Actually, I had set the stage for myself here in downtown L.A. The word would spread fast that a new fag was in town and that somehow or other he had made a jackass out of Big Boy. What I mean is that this gave me a sort of standing in the queer community.

Right now, however, I didn't want to spread my presense and my new-found reputation too quickly. I had to wait until dark before I located Ossie's Place, and I wanted no more trouble until then.

So I made my way to Main Street and slipped into a movie-burlesque grind house. Ever been in one? Fasten your seat belts, people, you're in for something.

2. *Monday, July 10, 6:30 p.m.; The Fancy Follies*

Admission was seventy-five cents into this dank, smelly, stuffy excuse for a theater. Actually, it had been, many, many years ago, quite a respectable motion-picture palace. But the neighborhood had gone downhill and so had the place. Now it was a barn with broken seats and rotting carpeting and flaking walls.

I stood in back for a while to get accustomed to the darkness. Up on the screen was a sixteen-millimeter picture flickering away to the accompaniment of a rusty musical sound track. What was the picture about? Ah, my palpitating public, *there* was the shtick!

A girl (!), stripped down to a skimpy G-string and stringier bra, was doing a simperingly coy dance of inducement. I'm here to tell you it didn't induce anything in me but the desire to throw up . . . and I like girls!

First of all, the "girl." She must have been in her late thirties, and time had not been kind to her. The face was big-nosed, hollow-eyed and thin-lipped. Her shoulders

were skinny, her chest was caved in, her breasts hung with as much life as lox dripping off a bagel. There were rolls of fat around her hips, and her thighs were hollow in between and spreading to piano design about the calves.

Had enough? Listen, if I had to suffer, why should I spare you?

She was simpering and smirking as though she were Cleopatra enticing Mark Anthony. Her gestures indicated that we, the audience, should come and partake of the dubious delights spread before our eyes. She twitched and winked and wiggled in an awkward manner supposed to emulate the movements of the great concubines but succeeding only in looking like a cement mixer gone berserk.

I'm here to tell you it was enough to make strong men blanch and straight guys think of going queer. Thank God I had the memory of Beverly Tyler and other worthwhile examples of the fair sex to keep me going! The girl up on the screen was a very big argument in favor of homosexuality.

By the time I had gaped a bit and swallowed hard a few times, I was used to the darkness and looked around. I wanted to be sure I sat near no one else. I wanted quiet and peace. But I need'nt have worried. The place was practically deserted.

I could make out some men scattered about the orchestra seats. But there couldn't have been more than maybe thirty or so. Each was sitting alone except for a couple in the section to my right. So I didn't have to worry about isolation. I could pick my spot and be alone as much as I wished. Or so I thought.

I moved to a seat several rows behind the couple and closed my eyes. There just wasn't enough strength in me to pursue the further adventures of the girl on the screen. Besides, she was about to be followed by another, and another, and another. All of the same sickening ilk, too.

There was at least an hour to kill, and I meant to kill

it even if it meant dying a slow and torturous death myself here at the Fancy Follies. The music clanged into my ears, but I couldn't shut that off as easily as I could eliminate the view.

Out of curiosity, I opened my eyes. A blonde had replaced the first female. This one was fat as well as simpering. She was positive she had the answer to every man's longing. She even went so far as to cradle her massive breasts in her hands and pretend to yearn for them by kissing in their direction.

Then she ran her hands about her body. Believe me, it was a very long trip. But an unnecessary one, as far as I was concerned. Finally she threw herself onto the floor and began to make elephantine love to the carpet.

There was a movement ahead of me at this point. The couple was busy. The two men had thrown their arms about each other and were locked in what was either a wrestling match to the death, or an embrace, also to the death.

Whoops!

One of them I suddenly recognized as my balding friend from the drug store in Hollywood. He certainly got around! Anyway, he was getting around his companion. I looked to see if anyone else was noticing these shenanigans or if the manager or the vice squad was about to descend on them.

Nothing. The others were slouched down, absorbed in the goings-on taking place on the screen. And there was no sign of any officialdom. This was an isle of vice isolated from the rest of the world.

When I looked back at the couple, it no longer existed as such. That is to say, my balding buddy had vanished. The other was alone. But . . . was he alone? His head was bent over as if he were looking at something down below. And his shoulders were wriggling.

Then he suddenly threw his head back, and I heard

him gasp even above the screeching sound track. A little more and his head lolled to one side. It was then that the balding fairy made his reappearance.

He rose from the floor like a slow wraith. His back was to the screen, and he looked right at me. He leaned on the back of the seat, leaning over as far as he could toward me, and whispered, "Next?"

I shook my head. He shrugged and moved away from his satiated friend to wander through the place and seek more conquests. The other guy, meanwhile, had fallen asleep. I could now hear rumbling snores.

Well, what are you going to do? They do exist, you know, and in many areas and on many social levels. You've got the idealistic types flourishing in the higher strata, and then you've got these scavengers, grabbing whatever they could without a word being exchanged, no names given or asked, only the quick, sudden and mysterious gratification found in the darkness.

Types like the balding one are all over, ready to be of instant service. They are in steam baths, in gymnasiums, in movie houses, in subway station men's rooms. They have one purpose in life, to bring and receive satisfaction through quick sessions of homosexual congress.

My guy had settled on another alliance. He was seated next to a dark man with a loud sports jacket. No bum, this latter encounter, just a middle-class gentleman who had heard about the Fancy Follies and dropped in to partake of whatever was offered.

A Japanese girl was now removing a pair of slacks up on the screen. Her tongue was poking mischievously and suggestively out of one corner of her small mouth as she glowered at the camera. Now, as the slacks slid down her thighs, the tongue moved from one corner to the other.

I turned toward the couple. My friend was sliding down to the floor.

It was time for me to leave.

Well! Grovel in a trough and you have to associate with swine. That's all there is to it. I had associated with all sorts of deviates during my life and times in Los Angeles, before and after I became a Counter-Intelligence agent, but this took the prize.

Remember that scared feeling I had? Well, it wasn't with me any more. It had been driven out by one of sheer sickishness. I was in a daze as I made my way out of the movie palace and into Main Street. The avenue was crawling with debris of all sorts. The sight made me long for the refreshing sight of the hippies on Sunset Strip.

There was a character with a beat-up gray coat down to his ankles. He wore a jockey cap over frayed black locks. He carried his hands chest-high before him, hands adorned with nails that had grown so long they curled inward and around into a mockery of claws.

There was a woman who had to weigh five hundred pounds, making her slow way up the street, step by step, each made with a tremendous effort, each made as though she would certainly fall over, thereby cracking sidewalks and shaking buildings to their foundations. She was dressed in 1920 baby-doll fashion, with short pleated skirt and a middy blouse, and her frizzy blond hair was adorned with a bright red ribbon. Furthermore, she whistled at each passing male through a toothless mouth. She didn't whistle at me, however. I was offered a suggestion by her which was well-nigh physically impossible for me to perform.

There was . . . but why go on? They were all there, the outcasts of the world, the dregs, the pitiful, the pitiless. Lost, all of them, and yet not lost, really. They had found their place among each other, each vying for attention, for ridicule, for love.

Still in character, I stopped at a hamburger stand for food. A heavy dosage of catsup managed to disguise the

sourness of the flabby meat of my sandwich, and the coffee wasn't bad. The joint was so horrible, even the bums didn't come into it. That left me alone to munch in peace.

When I was done, I belched heartly a few times and then was ready to face the world and Ossie's Place. I had managed to kill some time but not enough. But I just couldn't wait around on the street any longer. There was no telling what would happen to an innocent kid like me!

I found Ossie's easily enough. It was on a side street running off Main. There was nothing about the exterior to indicate it was anything but a shabby downtown saloon. The windows were streaked with dirt and the remains of squashed flies, the sidewalk in front was littered with discarded tissue, with empty beer cans, with bottletops, newspaper pages, crumpled cigarette packs. A feeble neon sign announced the fact that it was indeed Ossie's Place and that whiskey and beer were sold here.

The inside was even more desolate. The bartender peered up at me with rheumy eyes as he made a desultory sweep of the bar with a soggy rag. There was sawdust on the floor, dirt on the chairs and tables, and flies on the ceiling.

There were also a couple of human flies at the bar, both nodding over their beers, and an old pair, a man and a woman, seated at a table, both nodding sleepily as they fingered their glasses of wine. The woman was in rags and looked like Marie Dressler in *Tugboat Annie*, even to the large-brimmed straw hat with a fake flower stuck in it. The man was a blob, sixtyish and a mass of overflowing flesh. He had a stump of a cigar stuck in his wrinkled mouth, a mouth shadowed by the bulbuous nose that rose over it.

The bartender brought me a flat beer, his sneering eyes daring me to question its quality, and retired to his corner where he picked up a copy of a girlie magazine and buried his face in it.

"What, if anything," I asked myself, "am I the hell doing here?"

The bartender didn't look at all as if he felt like conversation; neither did the other bits of flotsam. To all intents and purposes I had drawn a blank by coming here. This just couldn't be the kind of a place where Jebediah Oregon would come for his pickups. Hell, it was enough to turn anyone's stomach.

"Hey!" I called to the bartender. "Are you Ossie?"

He lifted his head from a double spread of a lush nude and fixed a baleful eye on me. "What are you, a wise guy?" His voice was gravel running through muck. "There ain't no Ossie, sister."

Sister! If that wasn't putting me in my place, what was?

"The name came with the joint when the owner bought it." He took in the others to let them in on the ridicule he felt toward me. But they weren't at all interested. They were absorbed in their own sodden worlds and coudn't care less about this highly intellectual banter going on between the bartender and me.

But the bartender was beginning to enjoy his role. He folded the magazine carefully and put it away next to the cash register along with his other prized trivia and moved toward me.

"What's it to you?" he asked.

"Nothing," I shrugged. "Just making talk."

"New in town, right?" He had the manner of a very wise and superior personage querying an underling.

"Yeah," I said, trying to look surprised at his astute-[illegible]

"Trying to score as a fag, right?"

I closed my eyes loftily and turned away. "Please!" I protested. "How can you say a thing like that?"

"Look, honey, I seen 'em come and I seen 'em go. Ugly ones and cute ones—like yourself, sweetheart. Come here and pick up old guys and roll 'em when ya get 'em in a

hotel room. It's a wonder ya ain't all busted. But ya will be, sooner or later, sugar. Especially if ya don't mind your own business. Especially since ya go around and about askin' questions like a damned busybody."

"Who's asking questions?" I asked. "I'm just sitting here making small talk while I wait for my friend Lulu."

I threw out the bait and he took it. That is to say, he got a bit more florid than usual in the face. His eyes narrowed as he whipped his head around to take in the others. Then he got back to me, leaned over the bar, and whispered, "Who did you say?"

"Lulu," I said. "Told me to meet him here tonight."

Notice how clever I am? Notice how I used the feminine name Lulu in conjunction with the masculine pronoun *him*? That was to set the bartender straight that I meant a homo in general and one homo in particular.

"Don't know him," he said curtly, cutting off further discussion.

But he knew my Lulu, all right. He wasn't about to talk any more, but I knew what I had to do. I had to hang around Ossie's until something happened. Until I found out further about Lulu or until I got my head bashed in.

CHAPTER FOUR

You always hurt the one you love!

1. Monday, June 10, 8 p.m.; Ossie's Place

WELL, there I was, ducks, planted firmly in a sawdusted and grimy saloon, waiting for a nibble at my bait. The other customers stewed in their juices, and I sipped at a sickening beer while time went by and I killed more time before death. That's one hell of a way to look at it, isn't it? But it was true; the longer I live, the closer I am to the end of my existence.

But this was what I was dedicated to, this fly-by-night chasing around the mulberry bush, this digging into the dredges, this constant consorting with strays.

Blame it on my sense of guilt; blame it on my sense of responsibility; blame it, perhaps, on a certain flair for the dangerous and the unorthodox. Yes, and blame it partly on the pity I felt for the lost souls I had to deal with. They were certainly more to be pitied than scorned. They created a punishment for themselves that was worse than any the law could devise. They created a hellish self-exile into which they vanished out of the sight and sound of ordinary mortals.

Not out of my sight and sound, however. But then who said I was an ordinary mortal?

The bartender had refilled the glasses of the men at the other end of the bar, had retired to his stool and his pin-up magazine, and was now glancing at me. I glanced right

back at him. Listen, why shouldn't I? He was the only contact I had with Jebediah (Lulu) Oregon. Then, swallowing my bile, I smiled at him. They tell me I have a nice mouth, nice teeth, and a charming smile.

It worked. He hefted his bulk off the stool and waddled toward me, wiping the bar down as he came. Then he leaned on the bar, his heavy elbows almost making a dent in the mahogany.

"Listen, cutie," he said in a harsh whisper.

"I'm listening, big fellow," I replied.

We were both on a conspiratorial level, which was the way he and I wanted it; each, however, for different reasons.

"You're a very nice-lookin' guy," he went on. "Fellah like you'll be ruined around here in no time. Why don't you go on back home and straighten yourself out? Quit this whorin for fags."

Sounds sincere, doesn't it? Sounds like a good Samaritan, doesn't he? But his voice was trembling nervously and his fat lower lip was pouting and he was eating me up with his watery little eyes.

"I'll do that," I said. "As soon as Lulu shows up. She said she'd stake me to a trip back home."

"Lulu!" He spat the word out in disgust before he had a chance to realize he had denied knowing my tarket. Then he wiped the drool from a corner of his mouth and shrugged. "Yeah, I know Lulu. The money queen, that one! Love-'em-and-leave-'em Lulu. That fag's not gonna show up around here. Give up, honey."

The "honey" was no longer spoken derisively. Affection had crept into his tone. And his eyes had grown softer and and heavy-lidded as he gazed at me.

I managed to make myself look helpless.

"But what'll I do? I've got no one to turn to."

How do you like them apples, eh? Dialogue right out of *East Lynne*, right? Sure it was corn, but what else do you feed a pig?

His back was to the others, blocking me from their view. He reached out one pudgy, hairy hand and placed it on mine. It was a pretty goddamn hot and heavy hand, believe me.

"Me," he said. "Ya got me to turn to."

"You mean–?" I began, still reading lines from a ten-twenty-thirty melodrama.

His hand squeezed. "I like you, baby. Mind, I'm not a fag, ya know. But what the hell, I like ya. And a roll in the hay is a roll in the hay, right? Why waste it on the crumbs around here when a guy like me'd appreciate it. Tell ya what–" He was getting more excited now, his words tumbling out like ashes out of an ashcan. "Shack up with me in a hotel room a few days. Just three'll do fine, that's all. Then I'll give ya your fare back home and a few bucks besides. I'm not bad, baby. I'm a helluva lay."

"Ooooh, I'll bet you are," I whispered, wanting to lay him out right then and there, flat on his keester via a a straight right-hand chop to his beefy chin.

"Then it's a deal?" he asked eagerly.

"Tell you what, Pops. Just let me wait here for Lulu so I can tell her off good and proper. Then it's a deal."

He withdrew his hand and scowled. "The hell with that! Lulu ain't gonna show."

"Maybe if you tell me where I can find her? Then I could go tell her what I think of her and I could come back here and you and I could make hay in the hay?"

"How many times I gotta tell ya? She ain't around, and I dunno where she is. We gotta make the deal now or ya go back into the streets and hustle your little fanny with the rest of the bums. Now whaddaya say?"

Truth to tell, I didn't know what the hell to say. The guy was either stubborn or scared. He wanted no part of any reference to Lulu whatsoever. But he wanted a part of me, all right. His sick desire was written in sweat all over his face.

And it was then, while I twisted on the horns of a dilemma, that luck stepped in. Of course, I didn't know it was luck at that moment. Because all that did step in, in fact, was a shabby young morsel of rough trade coming out of the men's room.

The bartender cursed under his breath, emitting a stench of rancid baloney and raw onions. Very raw. Then he whispered to me, "Blow, buster! Get outta here and come back around midnight."

The entrance of the punk had nettled him, so I decided not to leave. I picked up my beer and sauntered to a corner table, sitting so I could face the entire room. The bartender got red in the face and went back to his stool.

The punk, however, had other ideas. He stepped jauntily to the bar and plunked down a dollar bill.

"Let's have a beer here, hah, Mother Mimsey?"

Mother Mimsey! So that was the name the slob went by. They certainly come in all shapes, sizes, and characters! The kid, however, was something else. He was small, slight, and good-looking in a dirty, pimply-faced way. He had bright, sad eyes, black and sparkling, and a small face. Other than that he appeared to need a week-long stay in a steam bath and several good hot meals. He was pathetic.

But not in manner. He actually swaggered as he sat on the stool and picked up his beer. Puffed up like a bantam rooster that had just had his fill of the roost, he looked around as if to see whether anyone noticed him in his great sense of self-importance.

He saw me and smiled. He lifted his glass in a toast. I lifted mine in response. What the hell; anybody that could make Mother Mimsey quake in his boots was worth drinking to, I figured.

At that moment the men's room door swung open again and another man came out. This one had no jauntiness, no swagger. He was about forty, fairly well dressed

for a guy in this part of town, and looked like a cornered rat.

He moved quickly, his head lowered between his shoulders, his face turned away as he made his way to the door.

The punk waved his fingers at him. "Toodle-ooh, lover! Come again some other time! I *like* you-u-u-u!"

"Listen, Bullets," growled Mother Mimsey surlily.

"Yeah, sweets," replied Bullets, his face lit up in a polite smile.

"Can't yuh read? Didn't ya see that sign in the men's room? 'Occupancy by more than one person at a time forbidden'."

"Oh? I thought it read, 'Oh, you cute pansy'. Listen, fatso, if we obeyed that stupid sign, you'd never do any business in this dump. So lay off, will ya? And give me a drink for my slumming friend over there."

He meant me, of course. The thing was that he spotted me as one who didn't really belong. I accepted his offer, nodding in response, and he brought the drink to my table, grinning at me.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, then clamped his hand over his mouth. "*Oooh*! Why did I say *that*! I didn't mean it that way." Laughing, he sat beside me. "But it wouldn't be a bad idea, would it? Say, you know what? I like your type. Gay guys who let their beards grow a few days and put some old clothes on and try to pass for one of the bums. Just for kicks, right? Like you get stuff here you can't find in Beverly Hills and Hollywood, right? Oh, man, you're a gas!"

A type. Not at all a swish, but part of the strong homosexual scene, A parasite living by his youth and his body. Wise to the ways of the deviate and prepared to service him with mocking good humor. Pretty soon, if he didn't die sooner through drugs or a beating or sheer malnutri-

tion, he would lose his youth and become an outcast from the outcasts.

Right now, though, he was having a ball and enjoying every minute of it. He pretended to talk like a swish, but it didn't quite come off. He was your typical bum male prostitute.

He was sitting close to me and one hand strayed to my thigh.

"I like you," he said matter-of-factly. "You wanna cop a feel, go ahead, man. It's for free."

"Later, maybe," I said.

"Like cool, eh, baby?" He winked ceremoniously. He withdrew his hand. "We'll play it like a couple of studs until you get over being shy, right? Then you take whatever part you want. Me, I'll do anything for bread."

He nudged me and gestured toward the men's room with a jerk of his head. "That cat really laid it on me. I men he paid me twenty just for a quick one. Beats working, I always say." He looked steadily at me. "Say, I like your type. Rather have you than that kind of pig. With guys like you I come on strong. I mean I like it. Not that I'm a goddamn fag, you unnerstand."

Oh, I understood, all right. He was worse than any fag; he was a parasite. But, like the rest of the victims of frustration, of poverty and moral hypocrisy, he was also a pitiful creature. I did not envy him his future.

He relaxed, confident that he had made a new and paying conquest in me. All Bullets had to do now, he figured, was wait until I got into the mood. Then he and I would go to one of the shabby hole-in-the-wall hotel rooms in the neighborhood, and ball.

Me? I hung around because I had nothing better to do. My brain wasn't clicking any too well at that point. I didn't know what to do next in chasing down my quarry. So I just let Bullets beam at me and I sipped my beer. It's a good thing I've got a strong stomach.

Suddenly, Bullets fingered the lapel of his shabby jacket and cried, "Whoops!"

"Something?" I asked.

"Hell, I lost it! Excuse me. I'll be right back." He got to his feet. "You won't go away, will you? Promise?"

"Promise."

And he charged back to the men's room. Funny, but the longer he hung around, the more he acted like a swish. Not much, understand; just the merest indications, the small giveaways. A year or two (if he lived that long) and he'd be a roaring fag, scrounging up money to pay off some new boy to be of service to him.

When he came out of the head he was holding something very small in his hand.

"Must have dropped it during the action in there," he said, grinning mischievously as he sat down.

Then he put a frayed little daisy into his lapel.

I tried not to stare at the flower.

"Wear that all the time?" I asked, fingering my glass of beer.

The fat man with the woman snorted heavily as he seemed to come out of his stupor for an instant. But then he settled back again, his eyes closed. His companion looked at him blearily and then stared blankly at the wall.

Two hunks of rotting vegetables.

Bullets smiled down at the daisy. "It's in honor of a friend of mine. A very good friend."

"Did he give it to you?" Be still, my heart. This could be it. But don't give it away, Buzz. Play it cool, man.

"No. But he wears daisies all the time, and I want to be like him. He's like you, buddy. I mean he's a gentleman, not like the bums you find around here. And I can tell you're a gentleman, know what I mean? I don't care if you didn't shave and if you are wearing beat up threads. Oh, I can spot 'em every time."

My disguise, then, was not so hot. But even though he

had spotted me as something else, he had made a mistake about one thing. I was no gentleman. I was a damned bloodhound on the trail of my objective.

I leaned toward him, letting my shoulder squeeze against his.

"Ooooh!" he said. "Are you ready?"

"Almost. Tell me about your friend."

"Oh." His hand was on my thigh again. "You get kicks out of hearing about other swingers? I could tell you all about it, you know. How he likes it, how him and me, [illegible]"

That was the last thing I wanted to hear. Any more of that kind of conversation and sex would be dead to me forever. My mind, my body, and my tastes run in a different direction.

"Listen," I cut in on Bullets. "Your friend sounds like somebody I know. What's he like, Bullets?"

The hand squeezed. My stomach did flip-flops. "I said he's like you, buddy," he said. "He likes high-class trade, like you do. Understand? You like me, he likes me. You're [illegible]"

Well, at least my disguise wasn't too bad.

"For an instance," Bullets said, "he dresses like a doll. Real sharp threads, know what I mean? And always neat. And on top of that, he's always with this daisy. A fresh daisy every time, no less. Class, man. What I mean is he's got style."

"Does he also have a name?"

At that point the fat old man seemed to twitch into life again. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. He was no longer slumped down like a soggy dumpling. He leaned forward on his elbows, his head downward, his wisps of long hair down on his forehead.

Something about him told me two things. One, he was not as groggy as he appeared; two, he was not as old and helpless as he seemed to be.

And something else: I began to get that vague trembling of my nerve ends. The indication of danger.

All this took the merest fraction of a second. My attention was split two ways. One on the old man, the other on Bullets, who was saying. "Sure, he's got a name. It's Lulu!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Waltz me around again, Fatso

1. Monday, July 10, 10 p.m.; the pleasure Hour Movie Arcade

JACKPOT!

I had located a definite contact. And here I'd been on the job only a few hours. My first inclination was to pat myself on the back. But it was only a contact, I told myself.

"Lulu, eh?" I asked Bullets.

"You know him?"

"Know him? My God, she's an old boyfriend!" I was trying to keep my voice pitched low but excited at the same time. This was the act of playing the frustrated lover looking for his mate. It had to be good to fool a pro like Bullets. "Where is dear old Lulu?"

Bullets looked a bit disappointed. After all, he'd thought he had a good thing going here, and here I was palpitating heavily over another man, for goodness' sake!

But he tried to be manly about the whole thing and a good guy.

"I don't know right now. Haven't seen him since last night."

Last night! Then the character had hung around town, had hidden out here in the slums, not thinking he'd be sought out here. Maybe this case would end up fast,

one-two-three, and I could heist myself over to Beverly's place before dawn.

"Oh, come on, Bullets," I said running a forefinger down his arm. "You can do better than that. I'd hate to be disappointed in you."

"Gee! I wouldn't flop on you! But I really don't know where his pad is, honest! He just comes here and hangs around to make a pickup and then cuts out."

"But where does he go? I mean, you've gone with him, haven't you?"

"Sure I have," Bullets said proudly. He seemed to resent the implication that he had not been to bed with Lulu, had not been good enough for the queer.

"Then where've you gone with him?"

He looked abashed. "In his car. We used to ball in the back seat, like, know what I mean? He'd pick me up and then drive to some dark street, like where the warehouses are. Once we went out to the oilfields. Hell, a couple times we were almost busted by the fuzz."

Caught up in his story, Bullets was himself again, a boastful vagrant telling of his conquests.

"But Lulu's got class. She made sure we got away clean. Didn't want to see me get into trouble, she said. Hated any kind of trouble, she said. People had to get along, no matter what kind of people they were. Nobody should oughta hurt anybody else. Talks like that all the time, Lulu does."

That's my Lulu! A humanitarian even while swinging in the back seat of a parked car with a male prostitute.

"Last night, eh?" I asked, prodding him to talk about matters more vital to my purpose.

"Well . . ." The eyes fell again. I had struck a sensitive area. "I . . . I wasn't with him last night. I mean . . . I wasn't his date, understand? But he was here for a while. That's what I mean when I said I saw him last night."

"Sure, sure."

I had to soothe the poor guy. His pride was hurt and his ego was withering before my eyes. Rejection, it seems, is something no one can take lightly, not even the fly-by-nights.

"You know," Bullets went on, lifting his head weakly. There was a romantic light in his eyes. "You know, we met right here, right here at Ossie's. He was sitting at the end of the bar all by himself, wearing that daisy in his lapel. That's the first thing caught my eye about Lulu, that daisy in his lapel. Style, know what I mean?"

Without turning my head, I glanced around at the couple at the table. Fat Man was no longer slumped over. He was sitting straight up and staring right at us. He had a sixth sense, however. As soon as I looked at him, he looked away.

But he had been listening. Hard.

"We made it that first time," Bullets was saying, a reminiscent smile on his mouth. "We was like bride and groom. Said he wouldn't take me to one of these lousy hotel rooms around here but he couldn't take a chance on taking me to his place. I figured right away he was somebody respectable, although he didn't hit me as a married man. So he says, 'Come on, I got a car.' And he walked out first and I followed. Man, he had a nice set of wheels sitting on the curb, too. Don't know the kind; me, I never paid no never-mind to makes of wheels. But it was kind of big and black and ran smooth as grease."

Fatso was still listening, looking like an alert blob. Mimsey, however, had lost interest. He was buried nose-deep in his girlie magazine. What a man of his hankerings saw in girls, I could not understand. Maybe the sensitive soul was bisexual, heaven help us!

Bullets was threatening to go on all night with his story, so I had to cut in on him.

"Kid, do you think Lulu will show tonight?" I asked.

"Why, sure. She's always here. Been coming here every night for weeks. Listen . . ." Bullets grabbed my

arm and looked into my face like a whipped basset hound. "You wouldn't leave me for her, would you? Hell, Lulu's old; I'm young. I can do five times what she can do and outlast her any time. And besides—" He got still closer, actually snuggling up to me—"if you're flat, we can do it for nothing, see? I mean, I like you, lover."

He was all queer now, completely the simpering, coy female in a man's body, the woman fighting for her male conquest. Bullets had gone even lower than I'd thought.

And, good grief! . . . he was fighting over *me!* I must have been something, all right. First Mimsey the bartender, and now this one, each begging to be my bed partner, one offering to pay me and the other willing to do it on the cuff. Egads, Griffin certainly knew how to pick exactly the right agent for this assignment, damn it!

"Don't worry, Bullets," I said soothingly. "I'll stay with you."

"But why then do you want to see Lulu?"

I had to stick to the same story I had given Mimsey. The two charmers would want to exchange notes on me.

"She played a dirty trick on me. So I want to get a load off my chest and tell her off. I won't feel right unless I do, Bullets. I won't be able to make it with another guy unless I blast her. Do you understand?"

"I dig your feeling, but I don't dig how you can feel that way about Lulu. Heck, she's a dream all the way. Like I said, she's a gentleman."

"I thought so, too. Until she doublecrossed me. It wasn't too much of a big deal but I feel bad about it. I'm moody that way." I looked away with what I hoped was a petulant expression. "That's how I am, Bullets. I can't swing free with my mind loaded."

Bullets stroked my knee cap. "Sure. I understand. Takes all kinds to make a world, don't it? Well, let's sit

it out then until she shows. But it won't be for a while yet. Never pops in before midnight."

I looked up at the fly-spotted clock on the wall. It was not quite ten. Two hours at the least. Meanwhile, there was Fatso to be concerned about. I had to find out who and what he was. And I had to do it before Jebediah Oregon showed up. I didn't want to have my attention diverted when he made his appearance.

"Hang around," I said to Bullets. "I've gotta see a man."

I got up and stretched lazily. Mimsey sneered at me and tossed his head like a disdainful bull. So I wanted to waste my time with a punk fag whore rather than with him, eh? Well, *that's* what he thought of *me!*

But Fatso was gazing balefully at me and not even pretending to be asleep. He was actually shifting all that massive weight about on his chair. It was like the beginning of a volcanic upheaval.

All right, buster. So if it's fun and games you want, I'm happy to play. I strolled out of the joint, taking my time, my eyes straight ahead. But I knew that Fatso was watching me and getting set to follow.

The night was waiting.

In downtown L.A., night, for certain people, means only one place. Main Street around Fifth. This is an area of cheap bars, flea-bitten stores, burlesque shows, and other elements of our Twentieth Century society. This was the place I had chosen for the rundown on Fatso.

I could hear his heavy footsteps behind me as I made my way past the slouchers on the sidewalk. Most of Los Angeles, I admit with pride in my town, is clean. The sidewalks are watered down regularly and there is an air of brightness to them. But this section is plain *ughhh!* Humanity's dregs dribble on the sidewalks and curbs, leaving traces of garbage as souvenirs. There is no difference between this area and places like it in New York,

Chicago, San Francisco and every other big town where development cannot keep up with neglect.

I passed brightly lighted windows with displays of cheap clothing, and came to an open storefront with the name *Pleasure Hour Movie Arcade* emblazoned across the top of the entrance. Racks lined the walls, racks filled with magazines and books. A quick glance told me that I was in a bookshop catering to erotica of the type calculated to send Kraft-Ebbing spinning wildly in his tomb.

There were fetish magazines, magazines dealing with whipping, bondage and domination; there were publications exploring the glories of male nudism, wife swapping and incest, not to mention the hoop-de-doos of courtesans throughout history.

It was a hell-hole frequented by the frustrated, by men who fingered through the pages looking for the ultimate in something or other that was missing from their lives. Behind a small counter was the attendant, a man with quick eyes and expressionless face who made sure no one walked out with a free sample.

Within the glass case of the counter were stacks of pictures of nudes, along with small boxes containing reels of film of strippers.

I glanced back over my shoulder. Fatso was blocking the entrance.

There was a small door at the rear, featured by a sign stating *Movie Arcade, Adults Only*. I headed for the Pleasure Hour that was in store for me.

Inside, it was dank and dark. A few small blue bulbs gave some degree of light to the room. Rows of peep-show movie machines lined the walls, with men peering into them to witness in private the dreams they dared dream only in secret.

I moved to the far end of the room, digging into my pockets for change to feed the machine. The end of the room was deserted and shielded by a turn into the area where the more expensive machines were placed. That

was for me, I decided. That was the place for my rendezvous with Fatso.

He had not yet come into the room as I made my way gropingly to my spot and rounded the corner. The machine asked for twenty-five-cent pieces and I fed one into it. I bent over and fixed my eyes to the viewer.

The blackness within came to flickering life and I saw a brightly lighted room. And a sagging bed. And a sagging girl. When I saw that the damsel had a skinny chest and skinnier breasts, I pulled back and waited for Fatso.

I didn't have to wait very long. There was no sound from him now, but I could feel the floor give underneath my feet as he came closer. My eyes still facing the viewer, I waited until he was close behind me.

I whirled and nabbed him. It wasn't easy, friends, believe me. He had a throat as thick as my thigh, and I was trying to throttle him so he wouldn't make a sound. But I didn't want him unconscious.

His arms and legs flailed about as I got a grip with one arm about his throat in a half-nelson. He lifted, and he got me up off my feet with the sheer force of him. No cinch.

"Glooob!" he gasped.

"Shhhhh!" I responded in a whisper. "Do you want to disturb the customers? Cool it."

Hanging onto his throat, I got my knee into the blob of his belly and dug deep. It worked. He doubled over and I got my feet on the ground. I succeeded in keeping the noise down to a minimum. If the others heard anything, they surely thought it was no more than an impassioned encounter, and they weren't about to show interest in something that was none of their business.

I was now able to get one leg behind both of his while I squeezed both my thumbs onto certain spots behind his ears. He collapsed, puffing hard and raising a cloud of soot from the floor.

Meanwhile, I am sure, the girl in the movie was going

on with her bumps, her grinds, her suggestive leers and her gestures toward the rundown bed.

I straddled the hippo and, still pressing on the spots, said, "What gives, Fatso?"

"Brlmphbrogrzt!" he said, meaning he couldn't answer with all that pain hitting him.

I let up on the pressure. His eyes were rolled back in their sockets and his mouth was blubbering.

"Not too loud," I cautioned him. "I don't like scenes."

He gasped a little and said, "Only . . . wanted . . . to talk . . . to you."

"So you followed me, eh? Couldn't talk to me back at Ossie's?"

"Felt kinda ashamed. My ol' lady . . . she was with me. You saw her."

Saw her? How could I miss seeing her? It would be like missing the Empire State Building while standing at the corner of Thirty-fourth and Fifth Avenue.

"You . . . you're hurting me," he whispered harshly.

"Yeah. I hurt people when they follow me around and try to mug me in dark places. What did you want to talk about?"

"Lemme up, please. I won't try anything."

I let him up. His face looked weak and scared. But not his eyes. They were deadly, so much so, in fact, that I got the sudden horrible sensation of feeling that if he had wanted to, he could have stepped on me and squashed me without effort.

The signal came back. The signal of danger. And it was very, very strong inside me. But Fatso wasn't playing the game as I expected him to. Instead, he was still the fat, blubbering idiot. He clutched his plump hands together and leaned weakly against the wall, threatening to collapse it, the building, and all of us at the same time.

"I heard ya talking' about Lulu," he said, his eyes staring coldly at me from beyond the mountains of obesity.

"What about it?" I was ready for any move on his

part, fast or slow, that he was about to make. I tell you, I didn't trust him worth a damn.

"She's gone, ya know. And ya oughta stop tryin' to look for her. All she wants to do is be left alone. It ain't fair for ya to trail her like this. She's through with ya, fella."

"Through . . . with . . . *me*?"

"Ya gotta be the one. Lulu's been tryin' to get away from some fella she's tired of. And she cut out. So why don'cha leave her alone? Everybody's entitled to some happiness in this lousy world if they can get some."

He was still slumped against the wall and tugging at the belt girding his massive stomach. The eyes were still on me.

"But I've got to find her," I said, feeding him more to mull over while I waited to see what his game was. Those eyes puzzled me. They didn't fit the rest of him. "Lulu needs me, whether she knows it or not. Besides, what business is it of yours?"

He tugged harder at his belt. It seemed as though the buckle had come loose and he was having a job holding up his pants.

"I'm just a disinterested party, fella," he mumbled. "And besides—"

Suddenly he was no longer a disinterested party. Suddenly he had a knife in his right hand—the same hand with which he had been tugging at his belt—and the tip of the blade was only inches from my guts.

"Nobody looks for Lulu," he growled. "Anybody who tries, dies. And you tried long enough."

Ever have an evil-looking knife aimed at you . . . and coming at you, too?

I have, several times. And I've never grown to like it.

CHAPTER SIX

Over the river and into the lake

1. Monday, July 10, 10:16 p.m.; the Pleasure Hour Movie Arcade

WHAT DO YOU do in a spot like that? Well, I've received training that does right by me in every situation. And in any emergency. Brother, I've been trained by the best. What my ace instructor told me to do in a situation where a guy's got a knife coming right at you and he's that close to you was:

"SPIT IN HIS EYE!"

Who am I to go against such expert advice? Besides, what choice did I have?

I spat in his eye.

I mean I let him have a glob right between his eyes so that the damage was thorough. Of course I didn't continue standing there, either. I did a sort of hop-skip-and jump away and to one side of him.

He screeched a guttural screech, floundering about like a gray whale. I gave him a chop across the knife wrist and watched the fingers spread suddenly and the knife drop to the floor.

"Try to keep me from my lover, eh?" I hissed into his ear.

I wanted him to remember that phrase. It was important he think of me only as a fag looking for his queen and putting up a fight for him.

Grunting majestically, he groped for me, wincing with the itch of spittle in his eyes. He got one hand on my right shoulder. And he squeezed. I want to tell you it smarted! That man had the strength of ten. I chopped down at the arm but it only served to make him grip harder.

Now he brought his other hand up and got a grip on my hair. I've got a pretty good head of hair but not that good. I was suddenly in danger of being a customer for a wig factory. I smarted some more and started to go downward, dragged to earth by the sheer force of those two hands on me.

Funny; there we were, the two of us, battling like crazy in silence while only a few feet away some drooling men were getting their jollies out of the peepshows. I doubt if they would have bothered with us even if they did know what was going on.

Life was too short for them. And it was getting shorter for me by the second. I had lost my control as he pushed me down. I was putty in his hands, and I'm not trying to coin a phrase!

Not that I wasn't giving him a battle. My feet and legs were braced for all they were worth, and my hands were trying to yank his arms away from me.

I suddenly realized that made as much sense as putting a go-cart against a steam roller. You can't fight a man with his own kind of power. You've got to use a counter-power. Elementary, isn't it? But who had time to think at a time like that?

What I did, I did by instinct. I dropped my hands, bunched them into fists, and drove them both into his stomach. When I say "stomach," I'm doing it for the benefit of the more squeamish of my readers. I smashed his groin.

"OOOOOPH!" he said.

The hands dropped. But he didn't buckle. He not only

had the strength of ten, he also had that many lives. So I let him have it again. Both fists. At once. Like pile-drivers, I like to tell myself.

I hate doing that to a man. The pain is excruciating. Even the thought of what I was doing sickened me. But it was him or me, and I was in no mood to have my assignment end at the Pleasure Hour Movie Arcade.

He belched this time and doubled over. His hands groped at his groin. I could see his face even in the shabby light. In one instant it turned white and then a sickly gray-green. His eyes rolled back until they were nothing but pupil. His mouth pulled downward at the corners and he said, "Euuuughhhh!"

I stepped back and watched him fall. I had to; if I'd stood there he would have brought me down with him. He landed a lot easier than I expected. In fact, he barely made a sound.

I pulled myself together, took one more look into the peepshow to wave ta-ta to the skinny broad now doing lonely contortions on the bed, and took off.

I'd had enough of Pleasure Hour Movie Arcades to last me a lifetime.

But Fatso, I decided, was no ordinary skid row character. This guy had a deadly mission to perform, and that mission was to keep me off the trail of Jebediah Oregon. He was hanging around the bar just as I had been, looking for a lead on old Jeb. And when he saw that I was about to spoil his setup, he wanted me out of the way.

No skid row fag relationship is important enough to kill for. So why had Fatso pulled a knife? There was only one reason: he was working for some very important people, people who wanted to locate J. Oregon as badly as the United States Government wanted to find him.

And, realizing this, why hadn't I killed him? Because I had to keep my cover, that's why. If I'd killed him,

his people would have tracked that fact down sooner or later, probably sooner. They would have known that the job hadn't been done by any ordinary hustler. And they would have been alerted to the fact that we were hot on the trail of J.O.

Besides, I wanted him to go and report to his superiors that he had been pushed around by a fag. Witness my last speech to him in which I told him he was trying to keep me away from my lover. That, I hoped, would do it convincingly.

It had better. Otherwise, knowing his employers as well as I did, I wouldn't last very long on this task. Or on any other, for that matter.

2. Monday, July 10, 10:35 p.m.; Ossie's Place

Nothing had changed in Ossie's Place except for one rather significant fact. Fatso's woman was no longer at her place. I paid this no mind, figuring she must have gone to make some kind of report. Brother, the types of spies that work for the other side! They must have gotten them out of Central Casting. Fatso and his broad certainly fitted their roles.

Bullets was at the table waiting for me. He jumped up eagerly, barely able to wait until I joined him.

"I got news!" he exclaimed.

"Lulu's back in town!" I was just as excited as he.

"Nope." Bullets took his chair, and I sat beside him. "She called up while you were gone. Too bad; you missed her by a minute. But she asked for me. Told me she's gonna miss me."

I resisted the impulse to grab him by the lapels and yank him to me. "What do you mean, she's gonna miss you? Is she going someplace? Where'd she call from? What's the story? What did she say?"

"Hey, take it easy, lover. One question at a time. She

called from the airport and said she has to go away for a while because she's gotta relax."

"Didn't you ask where she was going?"

"Yeah. I figured you'd wanna know, so I asked."

"Good boy," I beamed, making him break out into a relieved smile. "And what did she say?"

Bullets shrugged. "Dunno the place she's going to. Never heard of it."

I wanted to give him a mouthful of fists, but I smiled instead.

"Tell me what he said, Bullets. I'll know the name."

His brow crinkled, his eyes narrowed, his mouth pursed. He was straining what can be laughingly referred to as his brain. I waited, biting my lower lip while seconds ticked by. My guy was already on a plane headed for God knew where, and this idiot groped with an idiot memory.

Then, just when I was about to scream, his eyes lit up.

"I got it!" he cried.

"All right, Bullets. Take it easy. Don't strain yourself. Let me have it slow and easy like a good boy."

He looked at me proudly. "Bigley!" he announced.

Now it was my turn to furrow my brows. "Bigley?"

I have what can be called a prodigious memory. It absorbs and it holds forever. My brain retains the most fantastic collection of trivia you ever heard of. It also contains some important data. Like the name of every city, town, village, and hamlet in these United States.

And Bigley was not part of that trivia.

"Bigley?" I repeated. "Are you sure?"

"A place called Bigley . . . or Bigler . . . or something like that."

"Think, man!" I exclaimed. "What was it exactly?"

Mimsey was staring at me, but the hell with him. I had to track down the spot for which Oregon was heading,

and all I had to help me was an empty-headed male prostitute.

"I can't remember anything else about it, honest, man," Bullets said. "Hell, I never heard of the place; that's all I know about it."

"Bigley . . . Bigler . . ."

I sat back and tried to let my mind work on its own. I certainly wasn't any good to it. But sometimes, when I was lucky and I had the sense to leave it alone on its own, it could function pretty well and come up with the right answers.

I tried not to butt in. I shut off all sight and sound in Ossie's Place and listened to my brain thinking.

All right, Buzz Cardigan, this is it. Let this one go by and you're a dead duck. Bigler, eh? Or Bigley? Check your mental roadmap, son. But there's nothing there, is there? Nary a Bigler or a Bigley. Nothing even resembling the name.

Wait a minute. Could it have been Big something? Like Big Sur?

"Was it Big Sur?" I asked Bullets.

He shook his head dolefuly.

Okay . . . back to the brain. You just couldn't depend on humans. Let's see now. *Big Sur . . . Bigler . . . didn't something click just then? Big Sur . . . High Sierras. Remember once when you took a fishing trip into the great mountains, Buzz? Is something clicking, old boy?*

Let it rotate by itself. Something's happening. Fishing . . . Big Sur . . . Big Something . . . High Sierras . . .

Big Something . . . Was it a fishing camp? A river? A Trout stream? A lake?

Hold it, brain! A lake! But there's no Lake Bigley . . . or Bigler Lake or anything like that, brain. Where the hell are you leading me? Think, think, think!

BIGLEY LAKE!

Sure there's a Bigley Lake! Or it exists in your mind

somewhere. And then . . . what's this? It doesn't exist in fact but it does exist in my mind? That's crazy. But . . . is it crazy? You're close to the answer now. It's up in your mind, just outside of it, in fact, knocking to come in.

Here it comes. Open the door, brain, and let it in . . .

Bigley Lake . . . the name given to a beautiful body of water on the California-Nevada border before it became known by its present name . . . LAKE TAHOE!

I sat back, letting all the air out of my lungs. I grinned at Bullets. "Thank you and bless you," I said.

"Oh! Could you kiss me?"

"I'm still thinking, Bullets."

Lake Tahoe . . . center of upstate Nevada gambling, sister to Las Vegas and Reno, a one-day drive from Los Angeles or an hour or so via plane. A place of frivolity, of clacking dice and whirling wheels of fortune, of big and lavish floor shows and sparkling lounge acts, of gambling casinos and huge hotels on the Nevada side of the border and motels and mountain resorts and cabins and ski runs on the California side.

And a place of great and awesome scenic beauty, of hidden cabins, of huge, snow-capped mountains, a place even called Desolation Area.

A good place for anyone to hide out, eh, Jebediah Oregon? You could lose yourself in the gambling crowds or in the remote reaches of the mountains and the wilder-

But . . . you're a cat who can't go three days without sex, remember? That's your Achilles' Heel, Jeb, you old Lulu, you. You've got to come out of hiding at least once every three days and that's when I'll nab you, buster.

What the hell, I hadn't been to Lake Tahoe in too long a time, anyway.

Thank you, brain. Hope you still click as well when I'm face to face with Jebediah Oregon.

"Hey!" yelled Bullets. "Where are you going?"

"Out," I called back as I made for the door.

"But . . . but I don't even know your name!"

"If I don't find our friend Lulu, it'll be mud! Goodbye, all! I can't say it's been fun because it hasn't."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Blue Skies and Blue Eyes

1. Wednesday, July 12, 10 a.m.; Reno Airport

It's ONE of my favorite spots in the entire world. It's desert and mountain and river. It's clear and crisp; it's alive. It's cosmopolitan and it's rural; it's the East and it's the West.

It's Reno, Nevada.

I don't care what you've heard about it as a divorce mill and gambling town. That's only part of it. There's so much more. There's *The City of Trembling Leaves* of Walter Van Tilburg Clark; there's the exciting majesty of a land detached and proud; there are the Indians, still very much part of the local and modern scene; there are the handsome homes tucked away on the banks of the Truckee River and ranch spreads nestling along the valleys.

There are the mementos of the olden days only a few miles away: Virginia City, Carson City, Genoa, once known as Mormon Station.

Yeah, man! It's a great place in which you can remind yourself of who you are and what you are . . . if you can only stay away from the gambling casinos. Plunge into the crap tables, brother, and you become as common as common can be.

Me, I can take them or leave them. I figure my life is enough of a gamble without looking for any further chances.

The Western Air Lines plane made a smooth landing, and I stepped off, taking my first fresh breath of that pungent Washoe air. It was great, and it almost—if not quite—succeeded in clearing my lungs of the stench of Ossie's Place.

I'd made a reservation ahead for a car, and the rental service had a brand-new Ford waiting for me. A convertible, naturally. It would have been a waste to cover yourself against all that sky and ozone. I also came pretty well prepared for whatever I'd run into up here. I'd packed a flashy suit for the night life, some casual clothes for whatever; good-time clothes for good times, and also some rags to fish in if that came up, along with spinning tackle and a fly outfit.

Hell, I believe in all kinds of pleasure. And I wasn't about to spend time in this country without getting a chance to wet a line in one of the mountain rivers.

I was at the luggage rack, waiting for my stuff and looking around at the scenery through the windows, when I bumped into another type of scenery. I must have been moving around with my head in the clouds, I guess, because I didn't see her at all.

But I felt her, all right, when I turned rather fast and rather hard. I felt this soft femininity, understand, and then I heard a screech and she was falling away from me, her purse flying in one direction, an attaché case type of bag in another, and she in still another.

With my usual deft command of any situation and language, I said, "Whoops! Sorry!" and tried to help her to her feet.

And she had terrific feet. I mean they were small and sturdy and encased in shoes with heels so high and thin they could have passed for pencils. With points.

The rest of her wasn't bad, either. In fact, while she was kicking around on the floor, I saw quite a good deal of her. And she was all soft and creamy, a blonde of about twenty-two, with a cute, doll-like face, large blue

eyes with fluttering lashes (real or false, I couldn't care less; the effect was there), small and trim generally, but with a pair of breasts that more than made up for her lack of size in other places.

She wore a trim black mini-skirt and a tight sweater. I also caught the trace of silk and lace underthings while her legs kicked hither and yon.

I grabbed her hand and swung her to her feet. Smart me, I worked it so that she bumped into me on her way up. Now the headiness of her perfume hit me. And I want to tell you that the total effect was devastating. Especially when you've been without sex for—let's see: Monday, Tuesday—*my God! This was my third day!*

I was worse than Jebediah Oregon. Far worse, in fact. I was supposed to be a queer, remember? Therefore, sex was out . . . on all counts. I certainly wasn't going to make it with a fag, and girls were verboten. Oh, malediction and despair! Oh, fate worse than death! Oh, endless misery! Oh, hell!

Anyway, there we were, face to face and body to body and to hell with whatever was going on around us. It occurred to me at that rash moment that it was a bloody shame that we humans aren't as honest as animals. An animal meets another animal and they like each other on the spot and make love right then and there. No preliminaries, no awkward gropings, no nonsensical hemming and hawing. Just "One, two, thank you very kindly," and on with life as it was.

But all I could do was grin rather sheepishly into those gorgeous blue orbs and swallow my lumpish Adam's apple a few times.

Then she smiled. Well, she didn't just smile. What I mean is that she parted those ruby red lips and showed a row of fantastically lovely teeth. What's so hot about that? you ask. Huh, that's how much you know. You just never were mouth to mouth with Honeydew Demay's smile.

Yep, that was her name, as I discovered in a moment.

Meanwhile—oh yes! That smile. I gaped at her and then she dropped those eyelashes and looked down at her hand . . . or my hand . . . or *our* hands! Egads, I was still clutching her hand! It was as if she would vanish forever if I let go. But I let go. Reluctantly, I assure you.

"The least you could do," she said, and her voice was as the tinkling of Chinese glass in the soft breeze, "is help me pick up my things."

Tink-a-link-a-link! Would you believe it? She just wasn't real. She was all fragile doll, and yet sturdy and solid withal.

I floundered about and picked up her two bags. And all the while I was saying to myself, "Steady, Buzz! Remember what you are! You're the Man from Pansy! You're queer! So forget this delectable dish, this tasty morsel, this petal yearning to be plucked. You don't like girls; you like boys!"

By the time I was eyeball to eyeball with her again I was in full control. I'd fixed a disdainful sneer to my eyes that told her plainer than words that I wasn't interested in her or her kind.

And she spotted it, all right. Her manner changed instantly. The male-and-female spark was gone, deader than the Stone Age.

But she was still the sophisticated lady, the jet-set chick who had all kinds of friends, straight as well as queer. She gave me a fixed smile, the one she must have reserved for broke Johns, and said, "Are you in show business?"

"Nope," I said, as coldly as I could, just as if every sense in my being wasn't palpitating to be in any business she was in, in any world she was in, any house, any room, any bed—

"Could have sworn you were," she said. "My name's Honeydew Demay. I'm about to open in the show at the Silver Truckee up at the lake."

Well, what are you going to do? Got to be courteous, man, even if you don't dig the sex.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm just up here for a vacation. My name's Cardigan. Buzz Cardigan. And I'm driving up to the Lake. Can I take you? It's the least I can do after upsetting your applecart, so to speak."

I made it sound indolent. I made myself sound annoyed. I made the entire scene as if I hated sharing anything with her. But I was a sophisticated queer and would go along with a girl, so long as she was in show business, because that made her aware of the fact that some men just can't be had by girls, that's all.

Lake Tahoe is about fifty miles from Reno, up Clear Creek Grade and into the High Sierras. You go up and up this great sweep of a highway, with the mountains all around you and above you, and then they are below you with more mountain crags ahead.

You want to breathe deeply and shout with joy. Because this is what it's all about; this is breathing and seeing and feeling. This is the wilderness, barely touched as yet by human hands, and, pray God, never to be touched any further.

And then, just when you think you've had about all you can bear of this savage rock and greenery, you make what you think is a routine pass on a curving, and there it is. . . .

Lake Tahoe!

It bursts on you like a huge emerald jewel set in the mountains. The sight is breathtaking in its sudden splendor, in its solitary vastness, so unexpected here, a mile above sea level in the midst of eternally snow-peaked mountains. The waters shimmer with a variety of colors, blue, green, gold, lavender, even silver. There is a vast silence about it, and you feel as if you were truly in a temple of God.

I've seen it a dozen times, and I am still awed by it,

still enrapt by its majesty. And I wonder still what in hell modern painters think they are when they can't begin to create color and harmony and patterns like this.

Honeydew was sitting beside me still as a statue, her hands folded primly on her lap, her eyes taking in the sight. And do you know what? Her eyes were exactly the same color and hue as the azure sky.

I sighed and kept driving. There it was, only inches away from me, and for the taking, and I had to deny myself. Who was Nathan Hale compared to me? He gave but one life for his country; I died every time I saw a beautiful and available woman.

We were just coming out of the tunnel through Rock Cave when she broke the silence.

"Smashing, isn't it?"

"Huh? What is?" I asked.

"Lake Tahoe. I've always dreamed of coming here. So I studied up on it. Want to hear some of the facts?"

The only facts I was interested in were her vital statistics, like the measurements of her hips, her waist, her breasts—oooh, her everything.

But what could I do except say, "Sure." So I said it.

2. Wednesday, July 12, 11:30 a.m.; Lake Tahoe

"Lake Tahoe," she began, her marvelous chest rising and falling with each phrase. "Discovered by General Fremont in 1844. He called it Mountain Lake, and it had several changes until it became Lake Tahoe."

Beautiful tones, dripping with sensuality. I just grinned secretly and listened, wondering how she would sound in bed, wondering too if I would ever get to know how she would sound in bed.

"Surface area, one hundred and ninety-three square miles," she went on, making the statistics sound like the exclamations of an orgy. "It has an extreme depth of one thousand six hundred and forty-five feet, and an

average depth of nine hundred and eighty-nine. It's enormous. It contains more square feet than the combined total of ten of our largest reservoirs."

"My, my!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, don't give me credit for knowledge. I have a good memory. All that stuff is straight out of a brochure about Lake Tahoe."

"Still very interesting." And I managed to fake a yawn.

She gave me a bored look. "Too bad," she said.

"Too bad what?"

"That most good-looking men are either married or unavailable for some queer reason."

The shaft hit. I could feel it right in my guts.

"May I go on?" she asked politely.

"Please do."

Someday, brother . . . someday! Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to hand my resignation in to the Department, and then if you don't know what I'm going to do to every lovely, delicious, and available female within reach of me, you just ain't human.

She was about to speak again, but she stopped dead and gasped. I gasped, too. In fact, I gasp every time I see it. It's the town of Stateline, Nevada. It's right on the California/Nevada border. It's a little nothing nestled on the south shore of the lake and surrounded by mountains and more mountains.

So what's to gasp about?

Because, friends, right here in this wilderness, right here where a hundred years ago pioneers suffered and died as they made their harrowing way up the forbidding mountains, right here is a full-blown, high-rise, glittering, posh mélange of buildings in the modern manner, hotels, casinos, flashing lights, brilliant signs and everything else that Man can think up in the way of enticement and splendiferous glamor.

It comes as a shock, I must admit. God had done one terrific job out here, but Man was no slacker, either.

There rose the multi-floored Sahara-Tahoe, shimmering in the brightness of the sun against the lake, there was Barney's Casino, squat and reddish and with its sign advertising $25,000 keno payoffs and 250 slot machines; there was the Nugget with its band, its gambling and its 88¢ ham and eggs; there was Harvey's with the wagon wheel on the roof and the outside elevator; there was Harrah's Tahoe with its big gambling, famous stars and great lounge acts.

Man's idea of paradise in the midst of God's idea.

"Smashing, isn't it?" I asked Honeydew.

She was still in awe. She gulped, and her mouth opened so that her pretty front teeth showed. She looked very, very young at that moment.

"I had no idea it was anything like this," she breathed.

"Few people take the time out to look at it. Most have their eye on one thing only—taking money away from here. It's usually the other way around. They *leave* their money here. It's almost as if they were being punished for not noticing the beauty of this place."

"Well, I don't gamble," Honeydew said. "I'm just a working girl; I sing for my supper. By the way, where is the Silver Truckee?"

I pointed it out, a towering hotel-casino almost hidden behind the tall pines and the side of a mountain. It was set well back off the road, but now when we came around the bend, there it was, bigger and uglier than the biggest and ugliest of the hotels.

"Hey," I said, "you're featured."

Her name was up in lights on the sparkling marquee:

THE ALL-AMERICAN GO-GO REVUE

With The World's Most Beautiful Watusi Dancers
And Ravishing Songbird HONEYDEW DEMAY

She sighed as I pulled into the driveway.

"Thanks for the ride," she said.

"Nothing."

"That's how it is, eh, Buzz Cardigan? Nothing, eh? No dates. No smooching. Nothing."

"You know the score, honey. I'll see you around. Maybe."

And I turned to pay attention to the porters who were coming around for the luggage.

3. Wednesday, July 12, 3:00 p.m.; the Silver Truckee

Man, this was luxury!

My room had a view of the lake and the mountains and you could just as well die in it and figure you'd seen it all. I showered and shaved, and changed into a pair of soft gray slacks and a light pullover sweater.

I had ordered a tall, cool drink from the bar, a gin and bitter lemon, and I took that out to my patio. I could look straight down ten stories and see the people scuttling from casino to casino, from Harrah's across the street to Harvey's, then down the road to the Sahara-Tahoe and around and around and around.

I lifted my range of vision. There! That was better. My eyes were off humanity and its foibles and onto the beauty of the scenery.

I took a sip of my drink. It was refreshing and tingling. This was the only way to live and to die. This was peace and beauty, this was everything.

If only I weren't here on a grim mission. If only some poor fag hadn't decided to take off with his secret formula! Hell, why did everyone have hang-ups? Why didn't everybody just go fishing?

Well, the hell with philosophizing. I didn't make up the rules by which we live, by which America has to survive. Maybe I don't believe in some of them, maybe

a lot of them are outdated, maybe some cause more trouble than they prevent.

My job is to enforce them. And that's why I was here, a mile high in the sky, to chase down a clown with a secret in his daffy head that could mean disaster to us if I didn't get to him before the other side did.

Well, time for work. . . .

I withdrew reluctantly from the patio and went into the luxury of the room. It had a svelte sense of decor, lovely drapes, modern furniture of beige and black, a luxurious white carpet, wall to wall, of course, and a small envelope sticking through the opening at the bottom of the door.

Ooops! There goes that nervous tingling again. But maybe it was a note from Honeydew, thanking me again for the ride. Maybe it was a welcoming gesture from the management. Maybe it was a bill for my first hour at the hotel.

Maybe.

Wishful thinking, chaps.

What it was was a note reading:

Lake Tahoe is no good for losers. And you're a loser, Cardigan. Get it?

There was no signature, of course. An executioner never signs his name to a death notice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Round and round I go

1. Wednesday, July 12, 3:45 p.m.; the Silver Truckee

YOU PLAY IT cool, that's what you do. On the outside, at any rate. Inside, you've got to be excited as hell. You can function best when you're excited, when you're tense and ready for anything. That's when your brain works best, too. But, outside, all cool.

One thing I did know as I put the note away in my wallet for safekeeping, I needed help. Or at least I had to let someone know what I was up against. At this moment it looked like an insurmountable wall. Here I was, one man against—what? Another solo operator? Or a group? Or an entire goddamn ring?

The casino was bustling with the mid-afternoon crowd. Of course, the big action would not take place until nightfall. But the casinos operated on a twenty-four hour basis and there was always some kind of goings on.

It looked like night, however. The drapes were all drawn, and of course there wasn't a single clock in sight. So it might as well have been night. Some old ladies in comfortable house slippers were lined up before the slot machines, holding Dixie cups filled with change, holding squatter's right on their stools through many hours.

Some of the crap tables were occupied by a few gamblers rolling dice against the house, the biggest odds in

the world. Other than that, it was rather peaceful. Except for a small combo in one of the lounges, an old-fashioned trio of guitar, piano and drums. They entertained only themselves, however. No one paid any attention.

I got a handful of change, several rolls of quarters and some dimes, and slipped into a phone booth. This was one call that could not be made via the house phone. I made sure no one was hanging around and then got the operator to connect me with Mister Jay at the exclusive barber shop in Beverly Hills.

"How do you do-o-o-o!" exclaimed the lilting voice at the other end. "This is Mistress—oops!—I mean *Mister* Jay! What a delicious slip of the tongue . . ." And he/she broke up over that one. When Mister Jay was fully recovered, I began pitching the code jargon at him.

Truth to tell, I had one hell of a lot of doubts as to this cat's validity as an agent. His tone was that of a high-flying queer who didn't give a damn who knew his sexual urges. But I had to trust Griffin, didn't I?

So I said, "Mister Jay, my name is Buzz Cardigan, and I . . ."

"Buzz Cardigan!" he ejaculated gushingly. "My, my! Aren't you the Secret Service agent who was kicked out of the Department for swinging with your male lover?"

"Lay off," I growled, playing my part to the hilt, just as he was playing his. He was so damned good, I almost believed him. I hoped I was only half as good. But of course I wasn't playing my part like a limp-wrist queen. I was supposed to be the more manly type, one without any effeminate airs at all, thank God!

"I want to make an appointment to get a haircut."

Read that: *I'm calling you because I've run into something.*

"But of course! I'd be delighted to service you personally, Buzz." He made the z's in my nickname come out sounding like a lisp. But he was also telling me that he understood and was ready to hear.

So, using the code all the way, making what I had to say sound as though I were making arrangements to get my hair cut, telling him the Jay Sebring style in which I wanted it cut, and so on, I gave him the message.

I told him that I was registered at the Silver Truckee in Lake Tahoe, that I had already run into trouble at the movie arcade in L.A., that the guy I hit there had to be a spy because word had already gotten here that I was on the job of looking for Jebediah Oregon, otherwise known as Lulu, and that my life was up for grabs.

He told me, also in code, to send the note I had received on down to him for analysis and tracing. And to carry on, because I was doing just fine, just as I had done on the last assignment and as I was expected to do in any

But as we spoke it sounded like nothing else but a faggy barber and a customer who couldn't quite get together on the time for the appointment. The entire conversation, in fact, managed to end in a spat. How it happened, I don't know; it was just Mister Jay's artistry, I guess.

"Lithen!" he finally exclaimed in that gorgeous lisp of his. "Lithen to me, Buzth! Justh becausth you've tried every other bitchy haircut stylist and they can't take you on, don't come running to me expecting me to do you any favors! Gosh, dearie! I know you're supposed to be the bigesth and besth thwinger in the whole mother-loving L.A. area, but you don't mean *that* to me, you know!"

"Well, you can go to hell, you fag!" I replied, keeping in character.

"My goodneth! Do you think you're calling me thomething the whole world doesn't know? You better think of thomething worthe than that, thweeheart! But I'm tho many kinds of a deviate already, it'th gonna be hard as anything to think of something!"

And Mister Jay hung up on me.

I grinned secretly as I got out of the booth. Smart, that one, very smart. It was certain that there were customers in his shop who'd overheard the conversation. And he had helped perpetuate the image of Buzz Cardigan, ex-secret agent drummed out of the Service for being homosexual.

I strolled through the casino, glancing at the gamblers, letting my coal-black eyes flicker toward a male or two, playing the game, but being subtle at it. After all, my cover included me being madly in love with a man thousands of miles off in Washington, D.C. So much in love, in fact, that I just couldn't make it with any other man.

But I could look, couldn't I? And I could dream. At least, God help us all, that was the effect I was trying to get across.

And it started to work. A fellow playing twenty-one at a card table looked around and saw me and his eyes froze into mine. I glanced away modestly and kept going. But I could sense him gathering up his chips and following me.

Hell! I'd played it too good! What was I going to do with this one? Besides, I had recognized him. And he had obviously recognized me. He was one of the regular customers of the Queen's Court, the faggot bar formerly supervised by Merl Porter, now incarcerated forever, it seemed, in a mental institution for the criminally insane.

This one had been one of the silent ones, an observer, quiet but alert, watching everything that went on in the blue-light bar, digging like crazy, and getting his kicks only after he had made the proper contact.

He was no roaring queen, this one. Quietly dressed, small-faced and even featured, his dark hair combed neatly, only one fact betrayed him. That was his complexion. It was pink and cream and natural enough except for one detail. His eyelashes. They were lightly [illegible]

It was through these mascara'd eyes that this boy saw the world, a world of queerdom, a world of sexual opportunities. He was about thirty-five, trying hard to look like twenty-five, but managing to come out forty.

I was at the exit door leading to the parking lot when I felt a light touch on my arm.

"Pardon me. Buzz Cardigan, isn't it?"

I turned to give him a cold look. The dark lashes fluttered. "I don't know you," I said. I managed to sound masculine enough but with just the right tincture of femininity.

He bit his lower lip, very, very tenderly. "I . . . I've seen you around in Los Angeles. At the Queen's Court, as a matter of fact, as well as other places. I—er—I know the—ah—trouble you've gotten into on account of—you know—your—gosh!"

And he dwindled off, floundering helplessly. He knew that by accosting me he was making contact with a queer who was supposed to be a big leaguer. So far he'd known nothing but strays, male prostitutes, and rough trade. But I was of the elite in his book. And what a dirty book that was!

"Thanks for your interest," I said coldly. "But I'm busy."

I started to move off, but he blocked me. I swear the poor guy looked as though he was about to grasp the pot of gold but was afraid of losing it. He just didn't want to see me get away.

"Wait, please. Could you—I mean, could I—we have a drink together? Just a drink, I assure you, that's all." His voice, already weak, dropped an octave. "I'm not interested in what you think I am."

Oh? Oh-ho! What have we here? Is this the payoff, Cardigan? (I always address myself by my last name on these formal occasions.) *Is this fellow more than you thought he was? More than a bystander? More than an observer? More like still water running deep?*

"And where," I asked loftily, "do you propose we have this drink? In your room, perhaps?"

He gulped. It was more than he dared ask. But I had given him the opening and he rushed into it blindly. Or perhaps not so blindly? Perhaps I and not he was being taken over?

Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . perhaps! An agent's lot is not a happy one.

"I . . . think that would be . . . wonderful," he murmured. "By the way, my name is Hurtog. Calvin Hurtog. Shall we go?"

I almost expected him to take my arm to escort me. But all he did was walk a half-step ahead of me, back into and through the casino and to the hotel lobby. His body was tense, almost as if walking in a military parade. His ears were red, as was the back of his neck.

Me? I just felt as though I were walking into the lion's den. Calvin Hurtog, somehow, scared me more than had Fatso and a few other weird creatures I've run into. He had the stench of danger, a smell that wasn't disguised by the subtle cologne he affected.

2. *Wednesday, July 12, 4:15 p.m.; Up in Calvin's Room*

His room was on the top floor. But it had no view. And the reason it had no view was because the sleep-drapes were drawn. Do you know what sleep-drapes are? In Tahoe and Reno and Las Vegas, day is always turned into night. Night is for playing and day is for sleeping. So they have these dark and thick double-drapes, understand, and you never know when the sun is out.

He never looked at me as he opened the door, turned on a few soft lights, and indicated I sit in one of the comfortable easy chairs.

He moved to a side table where there were bottles of hooch, glasses, and a pitcher of ice.

"Name it," he said.

"Bourbon, straight."

I watched him carefully. This guy was up to something mighty unorthodox. He had sworn he wouldn't make a play for me, and I tended to believe him. So that was out. Then, what was in? The other only alternative: he was part of a ring—either my ring or theirs—and he was making his play, whatever it was.

And then—and now my eyes squinted as I really concentrated—another heavy thought struck me. *Could he be Jebediah Oregon?* I told you I was in heavy thought. Well, I'm a light-thought man myself. Heavy thoughts are no good because they're untrue and forced. I dismissed this one immediately. No Jebediah Oregon, he. Although plain of face, Calvin Hurtog was over six feet, at least three inches taller than J.O., and he was wearing flat-heeled loafers.

He handed me my drink, his eyes eluding mine, and sat on the divan opposite me. Still waiting, still studying him, still trying to figure him out, I waited.

He also serves who sits and waits, eh?

I told you, there was something about the character that scared me. It wasn't my usual type of nerve-tingling, edgy warning, the kind I felt that warned me of danger. This was something else. It was like being in the presence of a snake and you don't know if it's harmless or venomous.

He now held his glass primly in both hands on his lap.

He cleared his throat.

"Yes?" I said.

"You—ah—you were a Secret Service agent, weren't you?"

"That's no secret, now that I'm out of it."

A pause. Another clearing of the throat.

"They—they train you well, don't they? I mean, there's not only the mental skill that you have to bring

into your work, there's the physical agility, too. Am I right?"

"Sure."

This time the pause was longer. So long, in fact, that I had time to down my bourbon. And to make a face over its strength.

He ahemmed again, but now his eyes looked directly at mine. I swear there were tears in them. Soft, tender tears. And his lower lip was trembling. And the fear grew even stronger within me.

"That means," he said in a voice barely above a whisper, "that means you're in top physical condition."

I felt he was about to give it away, about to tell me the what-for of the situation. He was tense, all right, but I was getting even more so. There are some things the service just does not prepare you for, and this was all of them.

"I'm strong," I said.

He took a sharp inward hissing breath at the sound of the word *strong*. He closed his eyes and repeated it: "Strong. Yes-s-s-s."

And he hissed like a snake. The analogy was too close for comfort. Somehow, I wanted out. Somehow, I wanted the clean stench of the casinos. I also wanted another belt of bourbon, but I didn't dare ask for it. Calvin Hurtog was in a trance.

Then he opened his eyes slowly. There was a rather sickly grin on his mouth.

"You're trained for that, eh?" he asked.

"Among other things."

"All right."

He put his glass down on the floor, the drink still untouched. He stood up before me.

"Do it," he said.

"Do what?" I said.

"Bear me."

"Huh?"

"Beat me!" Calvin was speaking through clenched teeth now. "Take your big strong fists and beat me. All over."

"Hey!" I protested, the sick feeling spreading all over me. I couldn't think of a thing else to say. They never warned me about days like this at the Service Academy.

"I told you, didn't I?—I didn't want what you expected I'd want. This isn't homosexuality, Buzz Cardigan. All I want is for you to beat me up. Beat me until I collapse, and don't stop, not even if I beg you. Go ahead, Mr. Cardigan. I'm waiting."

Not me, though. I wasn't waiting for anything. I got to my feet and pushed him out of the way.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "You're rough! Get rougher!"

"How's that?" And I really gave him a shove, toppling him over the divan.

Then, mad as hell at being trapped with this kind of a deviate (as if I didn't have my hands full with all the other kinds), I plowed on toward the door.

And stopped dead.

And stared.

For there, pinned to the door, was a daisy.

CHAPTER NINE

Tuesday's child is full of grace

1. Wednesday, July 12, 4:30 p.m.; Still Up In Calvin's Room

I DON'T OFTEN lose my temper. It only happens when I get mad.

The sight of the daisy pinned on the door in all its solitary splendor, did it to me. I'm here to tell you I got riled up something fierce. And do you know why? Because I figured somebody was trying to put something over on me, that's why.

And that somebody was Calvin Hurtog.

Now I know about sick people, people with aberrations. I know that sexual quirks can stem from mental illnesses, from people being unable to adjust to forgotten and/or unnoticed events in their subconscious past. That's why I understand and get along with homosexuals and all kinds of deviates. Hell, I'm nobody's moral judge. So live and let live can be read, in my case, love and let love.

But don't hurt anyone else.

Above all, don't hurt me.

And I figured Calvin Hurtog had hurt me by trying to put something over on me. What it was, I didn't know. Maybe it was a form of entrapment, a way by which he could disarm me in my search for Jebediah Oregon.

Maybe. Maybe not. Whatever, I was suddenly a raging bull.

I turned on my heels and rushed back toward Calvin. He had been standing there with a hangdog look on his kisser. But when he saw me coming hard at him, his eyes lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Oooooh!" he oooohed.

I grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket. Bogart used to do that when he was mad at somebody. I don't know why; it left him completely defenseless should somebody want to take a poke at his gut. But if Bogey did it, it was good enough for me. And do you know what? It worked. Whenever I did it, the other guy got so intimidated, he never did take that poke at my gut.

Anyway, here I was, yanking Calvin toward me by his lapels and snarling in his face.

"All right!" I snarled. "What's the idea?"

"Oooooh! You're going to hit me! Wonderful-l-l-l!"

"I'm going to slam the living hell out of you if you don't tell me what this is all about!"

"Slam away! *Please!* Oh, you look so *beautiful* when you're mad!"

Beautiful, hell! I thought I was coming on like Humphrey Bogart and here this idiot was adoring me as though I were an angel by Raphael!

"I won't tell you anything!" he went on, his eyes sparkling with what I can only describe as an unholy light. "So hit me, big boy! Oh, do slam that old hell out of me! I love it, I tell you! I love it!"

I flung him away from me, and he fell across the divan. He gazed up at me adoringly, his lower lip quivering, his eyes glistening, his chest heaving.

And I suddenly regained my senses. Hell, how could I be Bogey? He was an actor; he had a script written for him; he was told exactly what to say and what to do, and so were the other actors. It was set up for him. Me, I was on my own. I was my own writer and my own

director in this weird movie called *The Life and Times of the Man from Pansy*. And the other actors weren't told that they had to behave toward me as if I were a hero.

So I had to use a different tack. God help me, I had to use my brains. This Calvin Hurtog, now, it was no use threatening him with a beating. A beating was exactly what he yearned for, and the harder it was, the better he would love it.

I calmed down, letting my breathing ease up, letting my heart stop pumping so madly. And all the while, Calvin waited and waited.

Finally I said, "I'm going to have to disappoint you, Calvin."

"Oh? Why?"

"I'm not going to beat you up. Not one little teeny bit."

"But don't you want to know whatever it is you want to know? I won't let out a peep about it unless you apply ponderous blows to my guilty body."

Brother! If I wanted to meet different people, I was certainly in the right business. And I do mean different!

"I'll tell you what," I said, smiling. "I'll do what you want—"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"—but only *after* you tell me."

"I'll tell you! I'll tell you!" Calvin screeched. "What is it you want to know?"

I pointed to the door. "About that daisy."

"Yes? Yes?" he said eagerly.

"Why?"

"Why what?'

I gritted my teeth. This was going to be a hard nut to crack.

"Why is it there? What's the meaning of it?"

Calvin shrugged. And my hopes went down with that

shrug. The guy was absolutely blank when I mentioned the daisy. And that bode me no good.

"It's there because I like it there, that's all. Is there anything wrong with it?"

"It all depends. Calvin, you're not coming through the way I thought you would. You're not playing fair. That daisy means more than just that, doesn't it? *Doesn't it, Calvin?*"

"*Ooooh!* You're *delicious* when you get angry! *Livid!* But I'm afraid that's all it means, Buzz. It's just a daisy pinned up there, that's all." A frown crossed his eyes. "Listen, you're not going to renege on me, are you? Just because I don't know anything more about daisies than that, that doesn't mean you're going to go back on your word! You *promised!* After all!"

I sighed. "Yes, I promised." And he sighed in joyful relief. Me, I was stymied. How was I going to handle this one? Me, Buzz Cardigan, trusted by the Department to break through tough cases, brought up short by a masochist who knew from nothing, or said he did.

"All right," I said. "Tell me this. Where did you get the damned flower?"

I didn't know what the hell I was talking about. I was just floundering, just making words because I had nothing else to say and I was trying to think up something brilliant.

Have you ever been caught in a situation in which you're trying your best to bring something off, using your skills and your craft, and nothing happens? I mean, you're a dud? And then, when you're off guard, when you barely know what you're doing, you make some kind of nothing move and it works like a charm?

Well, that stupid question asked of Calvin Hurtog brought me some sort of result out of the blue.

"Where did I get the flower?" he asked, repeating my question. "Why . . . somebody gave it to me."

I came awake. "Somebody gave it to you? Who?"

"I don't know. Somebody shoved an envelope under my door and in it was the daisy and a note."

"The note!" I gasped. "What did it say?"

Calvin reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a folded slip of paper. The color of the paper was pink. Naturally.

"I saved it, Buzz. Here."

I grabbed it. The words were typed. In lavender on the pink paper. They read: *You strike me as one of us. Why don't you join the club?* And that's all there was. No name, nothing.

"What club?" I barked at Calvin. "What are they talking about?"

"I don't know, Buzz. I swear I don't know."

It was at that moment I realized the reason for my nickname. It was because my head was buzzing. I was confused as all hell. Calvin was telling me the truth. He knew nothing. As for myself, I knew even less. So somebody had dropped note and daisy off for him with an invitation to join a club. And the entire scene ended right there. Had it to do with Jebediah Oregon? Or not? Was I up a tree or up the creek? And did it matter?"

Calvin hissed through clenched teeth.

"I've told you what you want to know, haven't I?"

"Yes, Calvin, you have."

"Well?"

"Huh? Well what?"

"The beating you promised me! The beating!"

"Oh, sure." I put the folded note into my pocket. "Close your eyes, Calvin."

He did as I asked. "Make it thorough. Ooooh, I've never been beaten by a professional beater!"

"Calvin, that was only part of my training. I'm not a professional bea—Oh, the hell with it."

And I let him have it. A short, sharp chop to the button. He went down as if pole-axed. And he didn't even open his eyes to flicker them.

And I walked out without a word of protest from him.

Can I help it if all he could take was one punch?

2. *Wednesday, July 12, 10 p.m.; The Silver Room*

I'd had a good dinner. (When troubled, eat hearty; that's my motto. Or sleep hearty. Or drink hearty. Or have sex hearty. But we won't talk about the latter.) Now here I was at a good table in the Silver Room, about to view the show starring Honeydew Demay.

The Silver Room is in the true tradition of the showrooms of Tahoe, Reno, and Vegas. That is to say, it is large, plush, and scrumptious. It is a bordello for the eyes, an opium for the senses. You are about to hear weirdly romantic music and see enchantingly beautiful girls, girls you see as Playmates in *Playboy's* center spreads, girls you dream about, girls in the nude and semi-nude, girls in twisting, writhing abandon, girls in soft lights, girls in—but why go on? I'm only torturing myself, me being the kind of person I'm supposed to be. What I'm doing to you, I don't know and couldn't care less. I have enough troubles of my own.

Nevertheless, the management can't very well present these dream images to you under ordinary conditions. So it constructs a dream world, a world of vastness and mystery and macabre lighting. And under these whirligigs of fantasy, you are offered the sight and sound (but not the touch, you!) of feminine virtuosity in all its profound manifestations.

I'm lucky it's one of the quieter nights; I was able to get this good ringside table all by my loneliness. So I sip on my bourbon-on-the-rocks, smoke my Pall Mall, and wait for the silver curtain to go up.

And then it happens. The music strikes up from someplace in a far-off land and I am instantly caught in the

magic of frustrated dreams. Horns blare and scream like female banshees in the lost wilderness, drums pound furiously, intoning the beat of my heart at its fastest pitch.

Oh, yes, buddy—I'm a fan. I like it. I'm carried away.

Then the curtain goes up and I'm not only carried away. I'm transported. Because the stage is alive with a mass of femininity the likes of which you wouldn't believe. Young, ravishing, lithesome, blondes, brunettes, redheads and shades in between; cavorting in what passes, I suppose, for mini-skirts, wearing shining boots and cute white gloves—they bounce, they wiggle and they stomp.

Their hips go from side to side, from front to back and front again. They slither, they jiggle, they wriggle. They exude youth and energy and they like what they're doing.

I like it, too. But I don't know if I can take too much of it. You've got to be damned young to dance like that, to give it the spirit, the energy, the drive, and all as if you were aiming it at a partner. But you've got to be awful young to be able to just sit there and take it. That young I'm not.

I'm at the age where I want to reach out and grab me some of it.

But do I reach out and grab? Do I act the way I want to act? Do I respond in the manner of all Cardigans—Irish to the last man, and healthy? Not Buzz. Buzz yawns and looks indifferent. Buzz, you see, must always act as if he doesn't go for girls, chicks, dames, dolls, broads, babes, the little darlings. Buzz cares only for guys, you see.

So I tell myself over and over again as my eyes ogle the divine sights onstage: "You're a queer! You're a queer! You're a queer!" But saying so doesn't make it so. And just when I was about to decide the hell with it, the hell with the United States and its problems with nutty spies, the hell with my undercover, counterspy

assignment, just when I was about to start throwing money at the girls, the music ended and the silken side curtains covered the scene.

"Whew!" I said under my breath. "And double-whew! Also hoo-boy!"

I took a sip of my drink. But it was awfuly warm for a bourbon-on-the-rocks. The damn show had melted the ice. I lifted my arm and a chick showed up, slithering up to me in the darkness. I could barely see her but I could smell her, feel her, and sense her.

"Yesssss?" she hissed, and there ought to be a law against that too. She made it sound as if she knew exactly what I wanted.

"A bourbon-on-the-rocks, please. A double."

"Of course."

She was leaning against me, her side against my arm. She wore a very brief bra and pantie arrangement, spangled with sequins. By shifting my eyes just a little bit toward her I could see a rise of flesh soaring up and out from her chest. That, I gulped, was her bosom. Almost entirely out in the open.

And the smell of her! Take one part girl, one part heady French perfume, and one part desire, and you've got a smidgin of an idea. And then there was—oh, yes! —a face. It glowed down at me, a small, perfectly formed mouth, a clean and youthful jaw, a pair of wide-apart sparkling blue eyes (at times like these I am known to develop night vision), a pert nose, and a head of solid black hair, cut short, gamin-like, with the cutest bangs you ever saw on her forehead. Or on anyone else's forehead, for that matter.

And she didn't move. She just leaned. On me. I wanted to lean back. All over her. Ah, sweet mystery of life!

"Whatever you want, Mr. Cardigan," she breathed.

She knew me! Then my spirits sank. If she knew me, she knew I did not care for girls. *I did not care for girls!*

Another assignment like this, Mr. Lawrence V. Griffin, and I'll be ready for the booby hatch!

"Thank you," I said, "Miss—Miss—"

"Homeyer," she whispered, making it sound like an invitation to a very private orgy—just her and me. "Tally Homeyer. Tally-Ho to my friends, Buzz."

"Yes, ma'am, Tally-Ho."

She flashed me that smile, breathing down on me with a hot breath that crisped me on the spot, and she was gone. Why did I run across chicks like this when I was on assignments that precluded my acting my normal self? Why was I working for Counter-Intelligence? Why was I born? Why am I living?

Sounds like a song cue, doesn't it? Well, you're right. The next instant the music came up and so did the lights, and there was Honeydew Demay in a soft blue spot, clutching a mike in her hot little hand and having at it with the song, "Why Was I Born?"

Now I want to get a few things straight. The girls who had appeared during the dance number were all the epitome of youth and sex. They had it, each and every blessed one of them. But Honeydew had even more and in greater variety and meaning.

She was small, as I've mentioned. But she was perfectly formed, with great proportions all over. And she had an air about her of having been there. And back. And ready to take off again, wanting only the right guy to go with. The others looked delightful and ready. But you couldn't tell if it was all a wonderful act, something put on because that was the way the choreographer designed it to seduce the male mentality. But Honeydew, friends, was no put-on.

This was for real. This was the real thing. The little bitch knew exactly what it was all about, damn her, and she was letting every man know it, also double-damn her.

She was against the law.

She sang one song, slow and throaty and sexy. Then she sang another, bouncy, fast, middle-voiced and sexy. Then she took off on a medley of current hit tunes of the rock-and-roll variety and of the standard type, also sexy. I'm telling you that girl just stood there and all you could think about was grabbing her and running off to the nearest bedroom. And fast. Before it was too late.

She saw me. That was a mistake. For me. Because she sang her encore right at me. I mean she started off by throwing the words at me and then kneeling on the bare floor of the stage and singing directly at me.

Oh, it would have been so easy to get up, go to her, take her in my arms, pronounce us man and wife, or lover and mistress, or whatever it took to get right to it, and consummate the union right then and there.

As I say, that would have been easy. But I'm made of sterner stuff. What I did do was a thousand times harder. I just sat there, gazed blankly through her, and yawned. I don't know what it did for the cause, but it took a good ten years out of my life.

She saw this, glared hot and heavy, and went off. The audience cheered and clapped and carried on something disgraceful. The good *turista* had sensed they were witness to something strange and exciting and Honeydew had gotten to them and they wanted some more.

But Honeydew wasn't giving them any more. She wouldn't even come back for a bow. Instead, after waiting as long as possible during the cheers and applause, the band struck up the cue for the watusi dancers and the mini-skirters came on to wriggle, to bounce, and to cut up. But the magic was gone. Honeydew had taken it away with her.

My drink was beside me, and so was Tally-Ho.

"Having fun?" she whispered.

Little did she know! "Oh, sure," I said.

"May your days be filled with more. And your nights, too. If you want anything, Buzz, if there's anything I can do for you, just call Tally-Ho!"

Over my dead body, I muttered to myself as she went off into the darkness. If I did as she suggested, bop!—there would go my whole career. In one fell swoop. But what a joy it would be to swoop upon Tally-Ho, fall and all!

I was downing my first gulp when someone slid into the seat beside me. Someone? Hell, why shilly-shally? It was Honeydew.

"Look," she said grimly. "You snubbed me."

"And," I replied, just as grimly, "you know you can't play man-and-woman with the likes of me."

"Oh, it was just a gimmick. I always try to find some man to play to. Perks up the act and gives the audience [illegible]"

"Well, you picked the wrong partner. Will you have a drink?"

"As long as you're not above buying me one, I don't mind."

I lifted my hand and Tally-Ho was at the table in an instant with something bubbly for Honeydew. I didn't waste time wondering about that. The bartender was probably readying the drink when he saw her walking toward my table.

Honeydew glared at Tally-Ho and Tally-Ho glared at Honeydew, and then Tally-Ho retired.

"May I ask you one question?" I said.

"Ask away. I can't guarantee the answer."

"Do you know what day of the week you were born?"

"Sure. Tuesday."

"Oh, that you are, Honeydew, that you are."

"That I are what?"

"Full of grace. 'Tuesday's child is full of grace.'"

"What are you, some kind of nut? What kind of conversation is this? It's bad enough you're queer, do you have to be a bore, too?"

"Sorry, Honeyd—"

I was lifting my glass to drink. The glass had been resting on a napkin. There was something else on that napkin.

A daisy.

I didn't give a damn that I was in a showroom and that a bunch of dancers were working onstage.

I turned my head, opened my mouth and bellowed as loud as I could:

"TALLY-HO!"

CHAPTER TEN

Wednesday's child is full of woe

1. Wednesday, July 12, 11:00 p.m.; the Silver Room

People hushed at me and hissed at me as I cried out. Honeydew made sounds like "Tsh-tsh!" as if I was acting like a boor. Which I was. But it got me results. Tally-Ho was at my side in an instant.

She had come in a hurry and her magnificent breasts were heaving deliciously with the effort. But who was looking? I was too preoccupied as I stared at the daisy.

"Yes, Buzz—er—Mr. Cardigan?" she asked excitedly.

"*This daisy!*" I exclaimed.

"Oh! How pretty!"

"Never mind that! Where'd it come from?"

"Why—isn't it yours?"

"You mean you didn't bring it with the drink, Tally-Ho?"

"I . . . I don't think so. We don't usually serve daisies with our drinks, Mr. Cardigan."

I looked up at her. Believe me, that was no simple task. Easy, but not simple. I had to look up at her which meant I had to look up past that swollen rise of her breasts, past those creamy and naked shoulders, up into that pert, cute face with its teeny mouth and large eyes and hair and. . . .

"What's eating you?" Honeydew cut in. "Why the tizzy over a daisy?"

"Shut up! I mean, hush, dear. Tally-Ho, you mean you don't know anything about this?"

"What is there to know? You've got a daisy on your table."

Hoo-boy! She was either giving me the greatest put-on, or she was entirely innocent. That made two of them, both involved with the flower, and neither aware of how or why—she and Calvin.

"Isn't it yours?" asked Honeydew.

"No," I said coldly and flatly. "It's not mine."

"Well, what difference does it make?" the singer went on. "My goodness! All this to-do over nothing but a daisy! Now, if it were a pansy, I'd understand your interest in it!"

She meant to be cutting. She succeeded. I was bleeding . . . inwardly. I sighed and glanced at Tally-Ho. Oh, but she was one of the unbeatables. She wasn't buying any of what Honeydew was trying to sell. Her look said two things, one to each of us. To Honeydew it was saying, "Go to hell, you bitch!" And to me she was saying, "I don't care what this cat says. I think you're the tops; you're the living end; you're everything, man!"

Or maybe I was just reading things into her. Maybe she too was part of the scheme, whatever it happened to be. Maybe she was a cat playing with a mouse. If so, I wished she'd play for keeps. With me. Like a woman with a man. But there I was in dreamland again. Damn, I had to remember that I was Counter-Intelligence working on spies and I had to be intelligent about it and not emotional or sensual. This chick wasn't making it easy.

Anyway, the show onstage was over. It ended with a crashing crescendo of music and pulsating bodies collapsing all over the stage.

"I'd like my check," I said to Tally-Ho.

I paid my tab without looking at her or at Honeydew. Both were too delectable to look upon without giving away my cover.

"Is that all, sir?" Tally-Ho asked me. She acted formal as hell, but her eyes were still melting.

I didn't answer right away, but stared at Honeydew. Honeydew stared back, and that wasn't fair. With those eyes and that body she had the advantage. But she finally took the hint and got up.

"Think I'll go powder my nose," she said. "If anybody wants me, I'll be at the Cuckoo Bar in half an hour."

When she was gone I said to Tally-Ho, "Baby, I'm very curious about this here daisy. I want you to help me. That means I trust you."

"Crazy!" she exclaimed softly.

Well, here I went and took a chance again. I mean she could have been my number one enemy, for all I knew. But chance-taking is the name of the game, friends. Besides, no girl that looked as loving and sensual as Tally-Ho could be all bad. Or could she?

Well, it was my own head I was putting in the noose. I'd much rather have rested it, weary as it was, on that soft and downy bosom, but what choice did I have? Maybe . . . in some other world . . . in some other incarnation . . .

"Tally-Ho," I said, bringing myself back to the grim facts of life as I knew it, "Tally-Ho, baby, try to remember, try to think . . ."

She narrowed her eyes and screwed up that little mouth in as pretty a picture of concentration you'd ever hope to see.

"Was that daisy on the napkin when you brought my drink?"

She wriggled her shoulders deliciously. "Oooh! You make everything sound like a poem!"

Truth to tell, my sentence was still ringing in my own ears, annoying the hell out of me. *Try to remember, try to think; was that daisy on the napkin when you brought my drink?*

I was trying to shake that one off when Tally-Ho said, "I didn't notice, Buzz. Honestly. I don't remember it one bit."

"It's important, Tally-Ho."

"I can see it is. But I can't help you, honey."

Honey! Why do girls say things like that in just that way? Why can't they say something less disturbing? Like buddy?

"But I'm anxious to help you out," she said, kind of leaning on me again. And making me even more helpless, even more dependent on her help. "You want I should keep my eye open for a daisy?"

Now I'd be the first to admit that Tally-Ho never struck me as a girl of high IQ. She was vague and her English was pickup, but she looked like all-woman and that's all a man should want in a woman. She knows her place better that way. And I meant to show Tally-Ho her place. In bed. If I ever got the chance.

"Yes, honey," I said. "Watch out for a man wearing a daisy, will you? If you spot him, find out his name and where he's staying. You're a smart chick; you can do that easily enough."

She leaned a little harder. Or softer, depending on how you look at such things. Me, I look at them just fine.

"I have ways, Buzz," she said.

She certainly had!

And then she leaned away from me and stared down at me. A small puzzle was in her eyes.

"Although why a hunk of man like you should be interested in a man who wears a daisy, I'll never know," she said.

I opened my mouth to try to say something bright. I could think of nothing, so I closed it again. She flashed me a smile and trundled off, her cute little bottom trundling like crazy.

I was left alone in an emptying night club.

2. *Thursday, July 13, 10:00 a.m.; the Tiara Flower Shoppe*

I skipped the rendezvous suggested by Honeydew Demay at the Cuckoo Bar and went right to my room to shower, have a nightcap and so to bed. Alone, damn it. Alone with images of Tally-Ho in her nothing costume, and Honeydew, small but powerful, singing to me in her nakedness, with Tally-Ho bringing me batches of daisies to sniff at. And then she pelted Honeydew with the flowers, pelting her all to hell and gone while I stood by and paid a thousand dollars in night club and florist's bills.

Morning was agony. No that I'd had that much to drink. On the contrary. I hadn't had enough to withstand the confusion by which I was surrounded. Morning was agony because I had an entire day to confront.

I showered again, shaved and dressed in something light and pastel: cocoa-brown slacks, a beige long-sleeved sports shirt, and a pair of tan brogans, and went down to the Silver Strike Coffee Shoppe for breakfast of ham and eggs.

The eatery was right off the casino. The management spared no expense making sure the customers were never out of sight of the lady known as Luck, no matter what they were doing. And even at that early hour, business was going on as usual. The slots were clicking, the wheels were spinning, and the dice were rolling. And money was going into the coffers of management.

Lady Luck was riding high.

The food settled well, and I took off. I had a few spots to visit while I played private eye. Except that this time I pulled no Humphrey Bogart-Sam Spade mannerisms. They were doing me no good so far. But I was being sharp, very sharp. You would have been proud of me, Mr. Griffin & Company. At least, I thought so at the time.

You see, I had an idea that I could find out about the daisy. Before I went crazy. Daisy—crazy. Is that sort of poesy the first sign of dementia?

Anyway, I got into my little Rent-A-Car and took off to make the rounds of the florist shops. And I hit the jackpot in a place called the Tiara Flower Shoppe, no less. It's a small place in one of the shopping centers. I walked in and found myself inundated by the aromas spreading about like strong mist.

And the creature that approached me was in a mist of his own. He was willowy, he was pompadored, he was adorable.

"How do you do-o-o!" he chirped.

He had a smell on him stronger than all his combined flowers. His jacket was narrow in the shoulder and flared out at the hips. His pants were tight all the way up and all the way down. He was also four feet off the ground.

His eyes, light blue against a gorgeously tanned face, danced up and down me. I wanted to cover myself like September Morn.

I said, "May I ask you a question?"

He lowered his eyes demurely. "Ask me anything you like."

"I'm conducting a sort of investigation, a private joke, kind of, if you know what I mean."

Mister Tiara smiled as though we were sharing an intimate joke. "Why, of course I do. Or rather, I'll know after you ask me whatever you want to know. I can tell you now, however, that I can take off whenever I want. I'm the owner here, you know."

"I appreciate that. But right now I want to know about daisies."

He furrowed his brow. "Daisies, sir?"

"Exactly. Does my question disturb you?"

"I can't say I know what your question is yet. But your reference to daisies is a curious one; yes." He

rested one dainty hand on his hip and fluttered the other hand to his brow. I waited while he pondered the disturbance that had struck him. He pursed his lips and his thin chin trembled.

"Daisies. Hmmmm. Curious. Very curious."

"May I ask you—"

"Yes?" he interrupted eagerly.

"What's so curious about discussing daisies?"

I must admit I felt like a damned fool, me, a full grown man standing there talking about daisies with this high-flier.

He wafted a gracefulhand about his shop. "Look around you."

I looked around and shrugged, not knowing what I was supposed to notice.

"Do you see any daisies?" he asked. "Not a *one*, dear boy. Gone! All gone! Oh, dear, where *are* the flowers of yesterday?"

"Where indeed?"

"That's the wonder of it, you see. There have been literally hundreds of orders for daisies these past few days. Why, I've had to wire Sacramento for fresh orders twice already. And still I keep running short."

"Oh? And who's placing these orders for daisies?"

Confusion? Oh, brother! The daisy dilemma had me in a spin.

Mister Tiara pursed his lips. "Men," he said. "All the people who ordered these daisies were men. Never did have such a demand on anything."

"What men, sir?"

The florist drew himself up to his fullest. "Sir! We never reveal the names of our clientele . . . except to the police . . .?" He paused questioningly, but he got no response in regard to my authority.

"Flowers," he went on after a moment, "even daisies, humble though they may be, are a private affair."

"But in such quantity?"

"This is still a free country, sir. Anyone can send flowers to anyone else."

"Even men to men?"

Now he was indignity itself. "And why not? Flowers are the finest expression of fine friendships. And there are many fine friendships between men."

"Like the one between Oscar Wilde and Lord Douglas?"

He sighed deeply and quaveringly. "Exactly." Then he giggled. "Wasn't *that* a great one?"

"While it lasted," I agreed cynically. "Thank you for your help, sir."

"Ah—is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid."

He was standing facing me. Now, clasping his hands before himself, he edged closer. His eyes were fixed at an area just below my waist.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered.

"I'm scared silly."

I couldn't disguise the slight sneer to my tone. I didn't like the type. This was the kind that made passes at small boys and bribed them with bits of candy. To my mind, and to the minds of thousands of honest homos, he gave faggots a bad name.

I let him know it by the way I talked to him and the way I looked at him. He saw it, too. He almost cringed as I moved past him on my way out to the purity of the sunlight.

But he couldn't resist one last crack, one he was sure was devastating.

"Teaser!" he snapped. "Coming in here and getting a girl all worked up and then walking out! *Teaser*, that's all you are!"

Teaser; that was what we called certain girls when we were kids, girls who would excite a fellow and then

quit on him before anything happened. I didn't know the term was still being used.

Leave it to an old queen like that to keep it alive.

As I got into my car, I realized the problem had become worse than ever. Now I had a whole town filled with daisy orders to worry about! It would have been easier to find the proverbial needle in a haystack than to find one particular daisy in this daisy chain!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Into each life a daisy must fall

Thursday, July 12, 1:00 p.m.; Poolside, the Silver Truckee

IT'S ONE THING to hit a jackpot; it's another when all the jackpots in the world pay off at once and you're running around like a madman, trying to collect all your payoffs at the same time. You go so out of your mind, you don't get anything at all.

That's what happened to me. Every florist shop in and around the Lake Tahoe region was out of daisies. And the answers in each of the places was the same: Yes, they were all ordered by men; no, we do not divulge the name of our customers except to the police.

Damnation! So near and yet so far! And what the hell kind of a case was this, anyway, in which I was chasing down a bunch of daisy buyers? Besides, suppose I located them? I wouldn't have been able to locate the trees for the forest. I just simply had too many clues! I was starving in the midst of plenty!

Mr. Griffin, couldn't you have sent me on a simpler mission? For example, how about going after killers and such? Tough guys I'd have to face with gun in hand and knife in teeth. Honestly, I wouldn't care what the odds were against me. I'll take anything rather than this! It'd be a cinch compared to running around in circles after an elusive homosexual whose only identification was that he affected a daisy, for goodness sake!

I'd had enough of flower-smelling shops. They reminded me of funeral parlors, anyway. I got back to the hotel, had a sandwich for lunch, changed into a pair of briefs and went out to the pool.

Ah, the pools of California and Nevada! Ah, sublime bliss, tranquility, sun-tan lotion and bikinis! Ah, tanned, coppered flesh of full bosoms and long, swinging legs! Ah, ah, ah!

The pool of the Silver Truckee was Olympic-size, of course. With a high as well as a low diving board. And the water was clear, clean and sky-blue. And beach chairs and lounging chairs at poolside, with small stands upon which you could rest the cool drinks served you by sweetikins waitresses in very brief attire—in bikinis, to be exact and agonizing.

And who do you suppose was poised on the high board when I walked out to seat myself on one of the lounging chairs? Do you suppose it would be some ordinary human being, like a man or a fat old lady? Do you suppose it would be some person who would not distract me from my detective-type thinking. Not with *my* luck, buster!

With my bad luck it had to be Tally-Ho, no less.

Tally-Ho dressed in ordinary street clothes is damaging to the eye. Tally-Ho in her brief waitress costume is unbearable to the eye. Your eyeballs hurt, your head throbs, and your heart does rapid-fire machine-gunning.

But Tally-Ho in a bikini!

On a high diving board!

Stretched straight up, taut, her arms overhead, standing on her tippy-toes, copper-toned, every delectable inch of her, sleek thigh muscles stretched, breasts pulled up high and tight . . .

The mind boggles, the senses reel, the world spins.

"Drink, sir?"

A voice from reality brought me back to the present. A chick was beside my chair, smiling down at me. Beautiful as anything ever created, this one, a redhead with

green eyes, lovely teeth, and a tall body complete with all the improper measurements. But do you think she impressed me? There was nothing left to impress. Tally-Ho had drained me.

"A rum and coke," I said. "Tall."

And I watched as Tally-Ho did a perfect swan dive, her body cutting through the air, clean and sharp and perfection itself, a dream, symphony . . . a whole gang of dirty thoughts.

Enough of that. I tilted back in my seat, spreading my body to the tender mercies of the sun, put on my Italian sunglasses, and gazed upward.

The Silver Truckee is built in Modern Modern. That is to say, a firm of architects used a series of piled-up cigar boxes as a model, covered all four sides with black glass, and added a series of patios on each story. Looking up, I had a crazy angle of row upon row of these balcony terraces, reaching upward into the sky.

Above that, the sun. Bright, glowing, and hot as hell.

And I tried not to think of Tally-Ho. Truth to tell, Honeydew took up a part of my mind, but Tally-Ho, for some reason I could not decipher, had very much crowded her to one corner. Honeydew had a mystery to her, and this quality is one I usually find most intriguing.

But Tally-Ho had health. Man, did she have health! All over! You not only saw Tally-Ho, you breathed her in like a gust of fresh mountain air. You sensed her even though you did not look at her. When she was in the world, you knew it somehow, once you were aware of her. She never let you go.

Like right now, for instance. My eyes were closed and my head was back. I was stretched out, to all intents and purposes dead to the world. But Tally-Ho was in my orbit. In fact, I could feel that she was close to me. Very close. So close that I could hear her voice in my ear.

"Come out of it, luv. You're not asleep."

I turned my head in the direction of the voice, and there it was. Tally-Ho at a distance can wreck cars. Up close, she is impossible. I was looking at the impossible.

"Hello," I responded, my sense of repartee as sharp as usual. Then I added another gem. "What are you doing here?"

"May I join you?"

I sat straight up, all sorts of visions darting through my oversexed mind. "Here? Now?" I squeaked.

"Oh, you!" She took a slight swipe at my shoulder. Then she sat down on the chair beside me, leaving me helpless at the sight and the nearness of her.

The waitress brought my drink. Tally-Ho wasn't having any, thank you. All she wanted, she said, was to be near me for a while and soak up some sun before she went back on her shift. I wished in silence that she'd soak up some of me instead. And I took a deep draught of my drink.

And then I remembered.

"Hey!" I said. "How about those daisies?"

"Oh, yes." She sat up to face me, crossing those long gams, the sun glistening on the drops of water, leaning forward so that her cleavage blinded me. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"All right." I tried to keep my mind on the business at hand and not the business I wanted to get my hands on. "Let me have it."

"It's very funny." That puzzled look was on her smooth brow once more. "You told me to keep watch for any man wearing a daisy, remember?"

"As though it were yesterday."

"You! It *was* yesterday, silly!"

"Go on, dear. Please go on."

"I'm trying to, Buzz. But you're a very hard man to conduct a conversation with. You keep interrupting with those jokes."

Jokes! I was dying, and she thought I was making jokes. "I won't interrupt any more, dear Tally-Ho. Tell me."

"Ooooh!" She shivered and when Tally-Ho shivered it was practically an orgy of one. "You're mad! Oh, you look so nice when you're mad. Buzz, you're pretty, do you know that? You're pretty enough to be a girl."

My God! And gadzooks! I was looking at the innocent of the century! The girl never took me for a homosexual! In fact, the thought never entered her pretty little mind. In further fact, I had the suspicion that she didn't even know what a homosexual was! Don't laugh when you read this, fellows. It's possible, you know, even in this day and age.

I told you she had a pretty little mind. Pretty . . . but little. But that body! And that face! And all that stuff! So she didn't have a great mind. Hell, we can't all be perfect.

"You're pretty, too," I said, returning the compliment. "Now about those daisies."

It was getting to be one hell of a job to get anyone to talk about the damned flowers. And Tally-Ho looked more confused than ever, thereby adding to my own dizziness.

"Yes," she mumbled, making a pout of her lower lip. "Those daisies . . . Hmmmmm . . ."

"Get on with it," I urged. "What's happened? What have you found out?"

"Everything . . . and nothing."

"Tally-Ho, I like you. Very much. But a little more of that kind of gobbledygook and I could learn to dislike you intensely."

"Gobbledy-who? Gee, you talk funny, Buzz."

"Talk, Tally-Ho! Talk funny, talk any way you like, but talk."

"I'm trying to tell you, for goodness' sake. It looks like hundreds of men in the hotel and the casino are

wearing daisies all of a sudden. That's why I can't tell you anything definite. How can I find out about all of them?"

I sank back, all life, all hope, all energy gone. I was dead. I would hand in my resignation in the morning. I was stalling the defenses of our Government against a band of daisy wearers.

"How can you indeed?" I said listlessly.

"Oh, Buzz! I've failed you."

I turned to study her. I tried to keep my study on an objective level. It wasn't easy.

"Listen Tally-Ho, how do you know me?" How did you learn who I was?"

She sighed . . . and that was a sight to block my objectivity all to hell and gone. Sighing did things to her chest. And to my heart.

"I saw you when you came in and registered. I said to myself, 'That's for me!' And I found out who you were."

"But my first name is Burgess. How did you know to call me by my nickname—Buzz?"

"I've got a brother in Vietnam. His first name is Burgess, like yours. And we call him Buzz. Did I guess right?"

I stopped studying. My eyeballs smarted. "You guessed right. Now go away, Tally-Ho. I want to take a nap."

"Can I stay with you? I'll be very quiet, I promise. And I could rub your head. I'm very good at rubbing heads and relaxing people."

"I'll bet you are. But no, thank you. You rub me any place at all and I won't go to sleep, Tally-Ho. So take off, dear, like a good little girl."

She giggled. "But I'm not a little girl. And I'm not good, either. Only at rubbing heads and things like that."

I pointed a stern finger at her. And tried to keep from aiming it at that pushed-out part of her upper anatomy. "Hear this, and hear it good. You're going too far. I said

I want to take a nap, and I want to do it without disturbances. You're a major disturbance, Tally-Ho. So go away."

She stood up, the picture of demure obedience.

"Will you call me if you—er—need me?"

"I'll call you."

"All you have to do is call out: Tally-Ho!"

"I know; I know."

She bent over swiftly and gave me a fast smack on the tip of my nose. Af if the sun wasn't doing enough damage to it already! At her touch, brief as it was, my entire body came alive with a series of tingles erupting all over me. It took five minutes and the last of my drink to restore some semblance of calm.

I am not an abstainer from the good things of life. Put me in isolation from fine food for a few days, feed me only ordinary things, and I become a gibbering idiot. Force me to abstain from good whiskey, rich beer, and aged wine for too long a period and I'm not fit to be talked to. Keep girls away from my bed, or me from theirs, for any period of time at all, and I'm not responsible for myself.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, where the hell was I?

Nowhere.

As Tally-Ho had said, I had everything and nothing. Too many daisies, too many clues, too much of a good thing. But nothing to hang on to, nothing that would lead me to Jebediah Oregon.

Then, with my eyes closed and the sun baking me, I remembered something you once said to me, Mr. Griffin.

"Buzz, old boy," you had said once while you and I were tying one on after one of my cases. "I repeat, Buzz, old boy, you have a homing instinct in spy work. Understand?"

You're usually not difficult to understand, but in that case I suppose it was the fact that we were on our tenth

martini that fogged my mind. So I waited for you to elaborate.

And you did. You said, "In every assignment so far, it's always appeared as if you didn't know where you were going. You blundered into this and stumbled into that. And it seemed continuously as though you were heading up blind alleys. But as I said, you have an instinct. Somehow or other—it must be a gift or something—you're not in any blind alley at all. Somehow or other, whatever you're doing is just right—just the right thing that will lead you to the solution to the case."

As I remember, you had a difficult job mouthing the word "solution." But, undaunted, you plowed on, praising me, telling me that the horse knew the way, and stuff like that there until you noticed that our glasses were empty and you got up to mix another batch of martinis.

Whatever I was doing was just right.

It was hard to think that, Mr. Griffin, especially at a time like this. I felt lost, completely and totally. But if you had faith in me, who was I not to?

But I could lie here and bake and let the world go by and not do anything about it at this rate. It was time to get up and have at it. So I stirred.

My first mistake was opening my eyes. My head was still partially turned upward and I saw it. Again.

A daisy. Floating calmly downward in the windless air. One solitary flower. Coming right down at me. As though aimed at me.

I jumped out of its way as if it were a bomb. But nothing happened when it landed on my now-empty chair. I stared at it like a damn fool for the longest time. I don't know what I expected it to do, talk or something, I guess. But there it lay, looking exactly like a fallen daisy.

I looked upward. The terraces loomed overhead. The daisy had come from one of them, that was for sure.

But that was the only thing of which I was sure. And there was row after row of those damned terraces, ten floors of them, too.

Somebody up there didn't like me.

Somebody up there was trying to drive me out of my mind.

Somebody up there was succeeding.

I wanted to scream out, "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" But how can you do that without revealing the fact that you've gone loco? So I did another act of defiance. Me—brave, strong, intelligent me—I picked up the daisy, let it drop to the cement, and crushed it under my bare feet. And all the while I was looking up at the terraces with a defiant sneer.

The reason for my action? Hell, I don't know. Maybe it was to show I wasn't afraid of whoever had dropped it down on me.

But do you know what? I *was* afraid. Wouldn't you be afraid of an enemy who fought with daisies instead of with fair weapons like guns and knives and poisons?

Dizzy with the heat and with the thought of the dropped daisy, I stalked away from the pool with as much dignity as I could muster. Which wasn't much, believe me. Because I walked smack into a guy, almost knocking him over.

"Ooops!" said the guy. "Sorry. My fault."

I was muttering apologies of my own, knowing it was my fault and not his, and thinking I had run into a gentleman or a fool, and adjusting my sights to the comparative darkness inside, when I took a look at my bumpee.

He was a slight kind of fellow, shorter than I, placing him at about five feet seven or so. He had a roundish face, rather pale around the eyes, slick black hair, and a hard kind of a mouth. He was also pale as alabaster.

But I paid little mind to any of that. What caught and

held my attention was the decoration on the lapel of his sports jacket.

A daisy, of course.

He was a little drunk. And a little friendly.

"I want to apologize," he said. "And the only way I can do that is to buy you a drink. How's about it?"

How's about it, indeed! Hell, I'd seen daisies all over—in my mind—on my table—tacked to a door, floating down from the sky. But this was the first time I'd seen one attached to a human being.

"Sir," I said, "I'll be happy to have a drink with you."

He took my arm. "Sir, hell. Name's Gary Fowler and I play horn here with the house band. I also drink a lot."

"I'm Buzz Cardigan."

He didn't blink an eye. *I* did, however, I blinked both when he suggested that, after I change into my clothes, I meet him at a bar in the Silver Truckee I had never heard of or noticed.

Its name?

The Sunflower Room, no less.

And how do I find it?

"Easy," said Gary Fowler. "When you come back down the elevator, just look up at the ceiling."

Up at the ceiling? I'd never bothered to do that. Evidently I'd been missing something.

I certainly had.

"There's a whole row of daisies pasted up there," he said. He tittered. "Like a chain, you know? Just follow that chain of daisies, Buzz boy. It'll lead you to the Sunflower Room.

Then he rolled his eyes.

"Everybody'll be there, too. Just *everybody!*"

I wouldn't miss it for the world.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Thursday's child has far to go

1. Thursday, July 12, 2:05 p.m.; the Sunflower Room

ALL RIGHT, so I followed the daisy chain on the ceiling. Hell, I figured, when in Greece, do as the Grecians. I wasn't worried about my masculine virtue. It takes two to tango, two to do what comes naturally, and two to do what comes abnormally. Sometimes there are more than two, but that becomes a *ménage a trois*. More than that number and it's a circus.

And after that small preamble, are you ready for this? Are your loins girded and your chastity belts fastened?

Because if you were with me at the Sunflower Room on that Thursday afternoon, you and I would have walked snack-dab into a convention of queens!

You heard me right. There they were, dozens crowded at the tables, at the bar, in tight groups against the walls, men of all shapes, ages, sizes and types. And each and every so-called man of them wearing a daisy in his lapel.

The Sunflower Room is one of the special banquet rooms of the Silver Truckee, the kind reserved for special affairs and private parties. This was both—special and private. I wouldn't have got in except that my new-found friend Gary Fowler was waiting at the door for me.

His bonded breath was enough to stagger me. When that man said he drank, he wasn't just whistling "Dixie!"

I mean you could get high just hearing him greet you. He took my arm and led me past the guy at the door who was checking the guests.

"Friend of mine, Gertie," he said to the checker.

"Of course, Minnie," said Gertie.

Gertie! The guy didn't look at all like a fag. He was straight in face, in expression, in body, and in dress. I would have tagged him as no more than a junior executive at the corner bank.

And that was how it was with the rest of the guests. They were ordinary-looking, conservatively dressed and soft-spoken. There was no hand-holding, no brushing up of thigh against thigh, no groping of hands toward intimate regions of bodies.

Totally unlike the scenes I had witnessed in Hollywood, in Malibu, in the fag bars and night clubs, in the hangouts of the roaring queens of the nether gender. This was an entirely different breed of the third sex. It was one I had heard about but never witnessed.

And come to think of it, how could you recognize it even when you saw it if the homos of this type looked like your Uncle Joe? They didn't screech, they didn't camp, they didn't dangle limp wrists. They did none of the expected actions except one. They called each other by feminine names. And they wore those damned daisies.

So that was what happened to all the daisies in town. They'd been gobbled up by this group to wear as identification.

I blinked my eyes and looked around.

Which one of these dignified gentlemen was Jebediah Oregon?

The lady known as Lulu . . .

Mine host was perfection itself. He led me to a small table in the center of the room, facing the stage.

"What are you drinking, Buzz? Me, I'm on straight whiskey. Healthiest drink in the world, straight whiskey. Adding soda to it gives you gas. Adding water only

dilutes and weakens it, taking out all its life-giving qualities. But don't let me influence you. Order anything you like."

"Black Russian," I said. "I feel exotic."

He smiled. "Good," he whispered. It was the only sign of the deviate.

But I did not relax my guard. This was a hip bunch I was with, very hip. They appeared cool and calm, but underneath all that cool was a seething passion, and I wasn't about to let it overtake me. Like the others, Gary looked and acted normal. But there was that daisy on his lapel.

And do you want to have another hard fact of life? There were no women about. Not a single, solitary female. Nary a broad.

Just men. Quiet men. Patient men. Drinking slowly, talking quietly. And waiting. I gulped. Waiting, eh? For what? What was going to happen here in the privacy of the Sunflower Room?

No use wondering. I leaned forward and asked Gary, "What goes on here, Gary?"

"Wait. I have to get you a daisy for you to wear. Some of the men are looking at you rather askance. The lack of one makes you look too conspicuous in this gathering."

He was right. In fact, I was beginning to feel naked. And naked was one thing I didn't want to feel in *this* company.

The waiter brought our drinks. He also brought a daisy for me. I blessed Gary silently for not offering to attach it to my lapel, and put it on myself.

Funny, but I never thought wearing a daisy would make me feel dressed. Maybe my job was getting to me. Are you listening, Mr. Griffin?

"There," said Gary, approvingly. "Now you look like one of us."

"Us? What does that mean, old boy?"

He sipped his straight whiskey, looking steadily at me

with a twinkle in his eye. I looked back, but my eyes didn't twinkle.

"You look like a sophisticated chap, Buzz."

"Oh, that I am. Sophisticated, Yes, sir."

"Of course you are. You appreciate the finer things of life, the delicate, the choice."

"That's me. How did you guess?"

"Your face. Did anyone ever tell you you're beautiful?"

He was gazing at me so directly while he said that, I wanted to lower my head and blush. So *that's* how a girl felt when a man fed her a line.

But I tossed it off as best I could. "I can't help looking like this."

"Gets you in a lot of trouble, eh? And a lot of fun, too? And kicks? Man, I bet you're just oozing with reasons for kicks. But that's beside the point. The issue is this: You're hip, so I can tell you. In fact, if you weren't the type you are, I wouldn't have invited you in here. You see, we've taken over the Sunflower Room for the week. In fact, the daisy chain on the ceiling directing our people here was our idea. It was put up by us. What you're in, my handsome friend, is the general meeting room of the Queens' Convention."

The Queens' Convention!

"Queens? But these don't look like homos," I said, fluttering my beautiful lashes in wonder and innocence.

"You're not as sharp as I thought, Buzz. Fact of the matter is that most people are used to seeing flagrant and brazen faggots, those damned unfortunates who come on in drag, or who swish all over the place. It's that kind that make it bad for the rest of us."

The Black Russian was delicious. I sipped it and waited. Gary was obviously launched on what was his favorite subject. He sighed, depressed as hell by the vagaries of fate, and went on.

"Most homosexuals are quiet folk. Like the men you

see here. They're respectable businessmen and professionals who wouldn't be caught dead acting like swishes. They're masculine all the way except when it comes to sexual preferences. And even then, they don't go for the so-called queens as partners. They prefer men like themselves."

He paused and picked his cigarette up from the ashtray.

"I . . . I was rather hoping you were one of us," he said. "Although I must admit you're really too pretty. You look more like the swish type."

"How," I said, "would you like a poke in the teeth?"

"Sorry. Hell, I told you I drink too much. If I haven't told you, I'm telling you now. Makes me gab too much. I may not look it, but I'm stoned to the gills. Forgive, please."

"Forget it. Where are these fellows from?"

"All over. San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles."

"Is this an annual thing?"

"First time. Called together by a man whose name you'd recognize at once. Big man in education. Figured it was time to do something about the bad name we homos are getting because of the swishes. Our meetings are private, of course,—the meetings of the Daisy Club, that is—otherwise we'd be glad to have you sit in."

"It's okay. I'm honored just to be invited to this, whatever it is. I gather you all call each other by feminine names."

"Just for this week, Buzz. You heard the fellow at the door call me Minnie. It's my one weakness, other than my natural one."

"Your—ah—natural one?"

"Yes. Being a homo. That's natural with me."

"Of course."

My mind staggered. I could never quite get used to

the logic of the third sex. Roaring faggot or conservative queen, each succeeded in justifying himself.

It was time now for me to make my play. I had to take my life in my hands and run for it like crazy. The daisy trail had led only to this—a conglomeration of homosexuals so vast in complex that my original trail, if it existed at all, was lost.

"I used to know a homosexual," I began, stumbingly.

"I'll *bet* you did!" Gary exclaimed.

I lowered my eyes in mock shyness. "I've had a few experiences. But the one I'm talking about, he was of your type. I mean you could never tell he was gay by looking at him. I never knew what he did for a living, but he had a feminine name he went by. It was Lulu."

I looked up quickly when I pronounced the name. Gary was swirling the half-empty jigger of whiskey. But not a flicker of concern did he show when I mentioned Lulu.

"Lulu, eh?" he said. "Quite a nice name. And quite popular among us."

"You mean there are a few here with that name?"

"I'd venture to say there are at least a dozen. And I also venture to say I'd like another drink. You ready? The show's about to start, and we ought to order. No drinks served during the performance, you know. It's a very special kind of show."

I glanced at the stage. It was dark, and the velvet curtains were drawn. None of the other men looked toward the stage. In fact, they seemed to be purposefully turned away from it. I scanned the members of the Queen's Society as best I could in the dim light, wondering if one was Jebediah Oregon, if the object of my search was within my reach.

Nothing. Just men, none resembling Jebediah as I knew him through the photo and the description. As usual, I was floundering, and as usual, I had to remind

myself of the faith Griffin had in me and in my instincts.

Ol' Bloodhound Buzz Cardigan, that's me.

Gary Fowler cut in on my vague thoughts. "This Lulu baby, is she a good friend of yours?"

I shrugged. "Just heard about her through someone who is a friend of mine. I was only wondering."

"Hmmmm. Any reason for me to be jealous? I've sort of picked you out for myself, you know."

"No reason in the world. By the way, when does the show start?"

"I don't carry a watch. What time is it?"

"Two-thirty."

"That's when it starts . . ."

2. *Thursday, July 12, 2:30 p.m.; the Sunflower Room And Beyond*

His words seemed to be a signal. Music suddenly came from stereo speakers placed about the room, and the hum of conversation smoothed down to a halt. Some of the men found seats, others remained where they were.

The lights dimmed into darkness, and there was a quiet shifting of bodies here and there. The music was that of soft drums and of a lute, both in something discordant but not unpleasant. I don't know anything about ancient and primitive music, but I'm willing to bet that was what it was. It was eerie and seemed to bring out forgotten ideas, ideas since from before birth, for Pete's sake, if you can imagine such a thing!

Now Gary slid his chair over to sit beside me. "So I can see the stage better," he said. But I prepared myself to ward off any under-the-table feelers.

The music built until there was nothing but an unholy screech, still soft, however, as if coming from a great distance. Then, slowly, the curtains parted. And there were two young men.

Naked. Their flesh covered with gold body make-up.

I'm here to state they were something else. Michelangelo knew what he was doing when he picked the male body as the acme of perfection in his paintings and sculpture. Me, I would have picked the female body. It's plenty good enough for me, what with its soft curves and its bumps and grinds. I like opposites, and to me a female is the opposite of a male, right?

But there are a few statements that can be made for the body male. From a purely aesthetic point of view, as far as I'm concerned. And the two guys up there on that stage, caught in a dim yellow light, nude, with only the metallic covering of their flesh, were holding poses resembling ancient statuary.

I heard several sounds of hissed breathing around me. Moving my head slightly, I could see the glow of eager, intent eyes, the drawing back of taut lips over clenched teeth.

This was beauty, all right, but beauty with an overlay of evil. It was the beauty of the lower depths of Dante's *Inferno*, of the cursed worship of the Golden Calf, of the damned carnality of the last days of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The two models must have been in their early twenties. One was blond and the other had hair black as coal. The hair was worn longish and in ringlets about their foreheads. They held their poses, standing apart from each other, one as the Discus Thrower, the other as Young David, for a long, long moment while the music shrilled.

Then the music changed. Now came the blare of trumpets, the roll of military drums. There was also the sound of breaths being drawn by the spectators, of long sighs and of something else, something eerie, that I couldn't define. It was like a long, soft groan from a hundred throats, primitive, mysterious.

But the figures on the stage were moving now. They faced each other, crouching, legs planted firmly, arms flexed, fingers tensed. Their muscles rippled and bowed

under the sheen of gold. They glared at each other, two strong, equally matched opponents, ready to pit strength and skill against one another.

Gary shifted beside me. But the sight on the stage was too hypnotizing for me to pay attention to him. I heard him draw his breath in in two quick gasps, and then he exhaled softly through his teeth.

Now the two men were only inches apart from each other. The blond reached out and grasped the dark one by the hips. The other retaliated by siezing his shoulders.

Someone screamed. And the scream died in his throat.

The two men drew upon each other, and their bodies came together in a grip that seemed too strong for anyone or anything to break. I could see the flexed muscles, the hardened knots of shoulders, thighs, and backs as they strained and heaved, each trying to lift the other off the floor in this strange wrestling match.

Now they twisted and turned in each other's arms, fighting for superiority. But it was not the sort of battle one associates with wrestling bouts. There was no aggresive force expended here, no attempt of one to hurt the other. Rather it was the need of one to conquer and one to submit; which was to be the active one and which the passive.

Suddenly, as they strained and tugged without a sound, with the music building to a crescendo, the blond tripped up his partner. The dark one fell flat on his back, legs kicking. And the blond poised above him, looking downward, ready to leap.

That was when the crowd of men rose as one. All except Gary. He was still beside me. But the others were standing, craning their necks toward the scene on the stage.

And then, with his mouth open in a silent laugh, the blond pounced upon the supine one.

There was a massive gasp and the audience crowded forward. Some of them blocked out my vision of what

was going on. For a moment I thought it was just as well. How could I describe in a report such as this what took place on that stage?

But the next minute I was sorry. Extremely sorry.

I was in total darkness, you see. And helpless, under such a condition. That was when I felt something poking me on my right hip. Something firm. Something definite.

I swallowed hard. "Now just one minute here, Fowler . . ."

"It's not what you think it is, Cardigan," grunted a voice in my ear.

"I didn't say what I thought it was . . . sir." I was stalling, trying to place the voice. It wasn't Gary Fowler's.

But before I had a chance to do any more thinking, I realized I wouldn't have time to do anything else. Not even breathe any more.

Because the husky voice said, "It's a gun, Cardigan. And I'm about to kill you dead."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Nitty-Gritty Complex

1. Thursday, July 12, 2:40 p.m.; the Sunflower Room In Black

ONE THING, chaps, I never got any orders to die.

Oh, sure—I'm ready to give my life for my country and all that sort of thing. But I'm not about to sit in the dark while some jerk shoves a gun into my side and tells me he's made up his mind I'm not going to live any more.

So when this here now character does what he does, hell, I'm going to do what I can do. And that's to let all hell bust loose.

He was to my right. (I had no idea of what happened to Gary, who was supposed to be there at my side.) The gun was there, too. My arms were on the table resting on my elbows. There we were, frozen in this macabre tableau. It seemed like hours since he had spoken, but it was only a second. I saw no point in trying to prolong the conversation. Neither did I want to wait around while he pulled the trigger. This was one case where delay could be dangerous.

So I did two things. At one and the same time. I bunched my right fist to make my arm hard and brought the elbow down and around. At the same instant I threw myself backward, chair and all.

Hoo-boy! I was in my element at last! There is a time

for play and a time for work, a time for thinking and a time for action. This was a time for action. I was tired of thinking, anyway.

Yep, the gun went off, all right. As I landed heavily on my back, the chair under me, I heard the sharp crack, saw the flash of fired-up light and felt—yes, chaps, *felt*—the bullet zing past my face. There was also one lot of commotion all around me, yells, screams, jumping up and down and hither and yon.

As for me, I was on my hands and knees in the darkness now. I was trying to spot the character who had put the slug on me. There were some legs near me; I grabbed those and twisted, my shoulder shoved against them. The guy went down with an *ugh!* and I groped for his hands. No gun. So I let go of him.

I was looking around for something else to grab when something grabbed *me*. That is to say, I got a clout behind my right ear that like to put me out. I saw a series of cute little stars exploding all around and a comet or two. And whatever had hit me was solid. Like a gun, maybe?

I was on my hands and knees when it happened, and it happened from behind me. I twisted and fell back, reaching upward. And grabbed a wrist. A very strong wrist. A very determined wrist. I bunched a fist and shoved it up hard toward where I figured a face would be.

I figured right. I made instant contact with bone and flesh. The bone gave with a sickening crunch, and I reckoned someone was due for a nose job. The person jerked, trying to get away, trying to loosen my grip on that wrist, but I hung on for dear life.

Let go of that wrist, Buzz, I said to myself, and you're all done. That wrist was attached to a hand that was attached to a gun. And that gun started to go off again and in all directions. I had a job pointing it upward so the bullets wouldn't hit any of the others, not to mention myself.

I counted five shots besides the first that was fired at me. But my guy was still trying to tear himself loose. The scrambling went on, the hollering and the running and scampering and somebody shouting, "Put the lights on! Put the lights on, for Christ's sake!"

But nobody did, and the confusion went on in the darkness. My guy dropped his gun, and it landed with a dull thud beside my head. I already had a headache, I didn't need *that*. So I kneed upward and kneed him good, right in the gut. He went, "OOOOPH!" and then growled, "I'll kill you yet, Cardigan! I'm not the only one in here after you!"

"Oh, yeah?" I said, and then made the most brilliant decision of my entire life. I decided to get the hell out of there. He who lives and runs away, lives to live another day. Right? Right!

That decision made, I made to put it into effect forthwith. Still on my back, the guy above me, I brought both feet up, doubling at the knees, and got my soles up against his stomach. Then I pushed. As hard as I could. Fast and hard.

He went flying, crashing into people, chairs, and tables in the darkness, starting even more confusion, creating even more havoc. I scrambled around to my hands and knees and looked for an "Exit" sign.

I saw two of them, all right, but they were away the hell and gone on the other side of the room. Between me and them were about three score milling homosexuals. And somewhere among them were one or two that didn't like me and had bullets in their guns to prove it.

There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I did a series of plunges, head down, shoulders braced, against and past those nearest to me. I was heading for the wall—any wall, any place away from the center. The important thing was to ge something solid at my back at least, so I wouldn't be attacked from there. Anything that was coming at me I wanted coming from the front.

Well, I made it, in a manner of speaking. I had to clout a few legs and thighs and crunch an assorted collection of toes, but I finally got to a wall. The only price I had to pay for my accomplishment was a massive headache and two shoulders that felt crushed beyond repair.

When I was able to feel the wall against my back, I knew a reasonable degree of security. Not much, I assure you. But the rest of the room, from what I could see on my hands and knees, was a total wreck. The gentlemen had lost their cool. Silhouettes rushed here and there, and the frantic dialogue went something like this:

"Somebody put the lights on!"

"Somebody unlock the door, for Pete's sake!"

"Don't anybody unlock the door! Do you want the law in here?"

"Who got shot? Is anybody hurt?"

"Who cares? Let me out of here! What'll my wife say?"

"Ye gods! This is terrible! There's no dignity to these meetings any more!"

I was making my way along the wall, trying to find any kind of an exit. Somebody was in that darkness with a gun or a knife and ready to kill me. And being killed wasn't in my contract.

And then something gave at my back. Part of the wall. Like a door. Hell, it *was* a door! I kept pushing and it gave some more. Inside whatever it was, it was as dark as the Black Hole of Calcutta. But did I care? Anything was better than this!

Just before I went inside whatever I was getting into, I got up a little higher and looked back over my shoulder. And I almost stopped to applaud what I saw.

The stage was still partly lighted. And there, on the floor, come hell or high water, come bullets or confusion, the two boys were still at it, still locked in a furious and passionate embrace, not giving a damn what was going

on around them so long as they finished what they had started. Greater love hath no one!

I couldn't resist it. Before I slammed the door behind me, I yelled back into the milling crowd, "Give the little boys a great big hand!"

2. Thursday, July 12, 2:45 p.m.; the Dressing Room

I was in a hallway of some kind; I could tell that as I groped my way along, my outstretched hands reaching for the walls. Everything was even darker here than in the larger room. But then I came to a place where there was a skylight overhead and I saw another door. I had no place else to go. I tried the knob, it turned and I pushed the door in.

"Hello!" I said as brightly as I could, just as if everything was normal.

And, "Hello!" said Honeydew Demay.

She was seated before a dressing mirror, applying stage make-up to that lovely face. Her hair was bound back in some sort of toweling. She wore a tight robe fastened at the waist with a thin belt, and her legs showed through the opening, the perfectly formed stems crossed so that the smooth muscle of one calf pressed against the shin of the other leg.

This was no sight for a guy who was supposed to lay off women. But what could I do?

"I was in the neighborhood," I said, "and thought I'd drop in."

"Do you always go into ladies' dressing rooms without knocking?"

She was smiling, her eyes dancing up and down my body. This was one girl who didn't play fair.

"Sorry, Honeydew. I had no idea this was your dressing room."

She turned back to the mirror and leaned forward to apply eye-liner. A smile still played about her lips.

"Were you at the daisy party, Buzz?"

"Sort of."

I looked around. It was just an ordinary dressing room. But the fact that Honeydew was in it made it more than ordinary. It made it downright uncomfortable, in fact. Me—celibate Buzz Cardigan, committed to abstaining from the fair sex—alone in a dressing room with one of the world's true beauties—and she in a state of undress. Hell, this was one dressing room that was misnamed.

"Any reason for this visit?"

I shrugged, knowing she was watching me through the mirror. "There was some commotion back there. I don't like commotions."

"Is that what it was? I thought I heard one heck of a racket."

"That's what it was. Mind if I sit down and catch my breath?"

"If it was almost any other male, I'd get indignant at him charging into my private area. But seeing as how it's you, there's no fear of you charging into any private area of mine. So relax and take it easy, love."

I sighed inwardly at the accusation and took a seat on a small divan against the wall. The little room was crowded as are all such places of the minor stars of entertainment. There was an open closet lined with gowns of all colors and designs; there were hats on the shelf and general litter strewn about. There were also pictures on the walls, eight-by-ten glossies of entertainers, small-timers, really, who played the night-club circuit, the pictures inscribed to Honeydew from her ever-loving pals who would never forget her. There was also an open tape recorder on a small table.

The walls were padded with soundproofing as was the ceiling.

"Hmmmm," I said.

"Hmmmm what?" Honeydew asked.

"Pretty special dressing room they give you. Padded and everything."

"Soundproofed, you mean? I do a lot of rehearsals of new songs in here. I sing to the music on the tape. Don't want to disturb the good citizens with my screeching."

"Hmmmm," I repeated. And then I sat back to listen. I could hear the small sounds Honeydew made as she tinkered with her make-up box. I could hear my own breathing. But that was all. The rest was silence.

Oh, I could have been a wise guy, I suppose. I could have played detective and asked her how come she could hear the racket from the Sunflower Room when this room was so well soundproofed. And I suppose I could have grabbed her and yanked her to her feet, stuck my kisser inches from hers and snarled, "Okay, baby! The jig's up, kiddo! Talk! Why are you lying to me? How come ya said ya heard the to-do when this room is padded tighter than a cell? Huh? Talk up, baby, or I'll shove those pretty teeth down your lovely throat!"

Sure, I could have done all that. But that's not my style. I don't beat up on broads. Besides, I didn't trust myself that close to her. Besides, the sound of the shots—six of them, for Pete's sake—could have been heard through any walls.

Just when I was mulling this over there was a tapping at the door.

"Damn!" Honeydew pouted. "This place is getting too popular. Who is it?"

"Gary Fowler—from the band, honey. Is my friend Buzz Cardigan in there?"

She looked at me with arched brows. "Are you a friend of that queer?" she whispered.

"I'm everybody's friend," I whispered back. "But I want to surprise him. Give me a second."

She shrugged and watched me as I walked to the wall beside the door. Then I gave her the nod.

She cried out, "Come in, Gary!"

I helped him swing the door open. The unexpected lack of resistance pulled him inward, and I grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him in even harder and faster. But I didn't let go of him. I brought one fist up and crunched it under his chin, forcing his head upward. Only it didn't go up to high because my hand on the back of his neck stopped that.

His eyes were popping out of his head. His mouth was squeezed shut, and he was drooling through his teeth.

I kicked the door shut, still hanging onto him. I didn't know what reactions Honeydew was having. I didn't care. I had my hands full with this one.

I let go of his chin and took the same fist and drove it into the pit of his stomach immediately where the rib cage comes to a bottom. He belched right into my face, and out came a torrent of alcholic fumes that could have sunk a brigade.

He folded neatly in half at the waist and went down head first. The top of his head hit the floor with a thud. He stayed like an upside-down V for a few seconds and then fell of his side.

I yanked him to his feet. Nobody was lying down on the job while my life was on the line.

"All right, Gary," I growled. "Where were *you* when the lights went out?"

"Gee whiz, Buzz baby, what the hell do you think you're doing? I'm your buddy, pal, and you hit me like this! Ain'tcha got any sense of loyalty?"

"Only to my life. Who fired the shots, Gary?"

"Shots?" screeched Honeydew. "Was that what I heard? Shots? Like from a gun?"

"The very same. And they were meant for me." I yanked at Gary's shoulders. I was holding him up more than I was doing anything else. The slob was dead weight. "Isn't that so, Gary?"

"Buzz . . . gee . . . honest . . . put me down, man, will you? Let me sit down a second. You hit awful hard,

buddy. You like to make a guy sick. In fact . . ." and his face got dead white ". . . I . . . I think I'm going to be sick!"

"Not in my dressing room you don't! Goddamn musicians anyway!" Honeydew was hopping up and down like an anguished kangaroo. "Get him into the toilet, Buzz! *Get him into the toilet, dammit!*"

There was a small bath attached to the dressing room. I got Gary into it just in time.

You thousands of red-blooded American boys out there, you who are anxious to become secret agents and who thrill to the thought of the glamor of the profession, think a moment. Think of me in the tiny toilet, hanging onto a guy while he throws up all over the place, me getting as sick as he because I never had a stomach for playing nurse, think of me, just seconds away from having escaped having my skull punctured by a bullet, and now doing *this!*

Think about it and then get into something clean, will you? Like garbarge collecting?

After he was as done as he ever would be, I shoved his head under the tap and ran the cold water down on him. He sputtered and choked but I was relentless. This guy had to be put into condition to do some talking.

I wiped him down and studied his face. He was no longer white. His complexion was a mottled gray. His eyes were bloodshot and out of focus. But he was, to all intents and purposes, alive.

I got him back into the dressing room and shoved him onto the divan. Honeydew had turned away, delicate creature, her eyes closed and her hands over her mouth.

"Get him out of here, please, Buzz," she pleaded.

"In a minute, dear." I leaned toward Gary. "Nu, buster? I repeat, what happened? One minute you and I were sitting comfy-cozy watching a show, and the next shots were coming at me and you were out of sight."

His eyes found me. It took some effort, but they found me.

"Buzz, I don't know what this is all about, believe me."

"You were there. You were right next to me. And all of a sudden you weren't there. Somebody else had taken your place, lover. Somebody with a gun."

"A gun! Yes! I heard the shots. That's when I came to."

"That's when you came to?"

"I musta passed out, Buzz, right next to you. The last thing I remember was the two lovers making it on the stage. Suddenly they were doing things I didn't think possible. They were spinning around the room all the while they were swinging. Man, were they swinging! Then the next thing I know, there was all that noise. Man, bang, bang, bang! At first I thought it was all in my head, what with the booze and all. Then I realized somebody had a gun and was shooting it."

"Did you see who it was?"

"Man, if I did, it didn't register. All I saw was all the guys running around, bumping into each other and falling over, and . . ."

He paused, his eyes lighting up in recollection.

"Yes?" I prodded. "Yes? Yes?"

"Man, those two queens up on the stage, they never quit, you know that? Talk about concentration! Like wow, man!"

And his head lolled, his chin sinking onto his chest.

Gary Fowler was not lying. He had told me all he knew. No man could be as drunk and sick as he looked and tell anything but the truth. *In vino veritas.* And in hooch there is even more truth.

"Buzz, I'm telling you for the last time," Honeydew said evenly. "Get that lout out of my dressing room."

"Let's go, pal." I yanked him to his feet and held him up. "Mama don't want no throwing up in here."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I love my wife, But oh you kid!

1. Thursday, July 12, 3:36 p.m.; In and Around

I WORKED FAST. I had to. Mine enemies were working faster.

First thing I did was get Gary Fowler up to my room. Truth or no truth, this was one guy I had to keep my eye on. I dumped him onto my couch (he was already sound asleep by the time I got him through the door), and than sat and looked at him a while.

He was no beauty.

Not in any way at all. Especially drunk. His mouth sagged and his facial muscles hung and he snored in a way to terrify the dead. Worse of all, the dead daisy still hung in his lapel. I remembered mine and tore it off and threw it into the wastebasket.

Stirring about now, I did something else.

I'm not supposed to carry a gun, am I, chaps? That's part of my orders. But there are mitigating circumstances, as they say on the Perry Mason show. Mitigating circumstance number one: how the hell am I supposed to pass as a homosexual when I'm as straight as a bull in heat? Number two: some guys around were determined to go rootety-toot at me, and what they wanted to do it with were not cap pistols. What they did use made an awful lot of noise and emitted a lot of flame and slammed out a lot of bullets.

Need I go further? I went only as far as my tackle box. There, stashed away beneath a bunch of plugs and lures, was something wrapped in black. That something was a .38. Then I opened a small plastic box containing snaps, swivels, and whatnots. Among the whatnots were some bullets.

I loaded the .38 and put some extra shells in my pocket.

I intend to die in one of several ways. First and preferable is of old age. Second is with my boots on, with a blazing gun in my hand, making sure I've killed my killer. In a case like the latter, it's like drinking alone. I hate it.

I hate it in any case, but I would hate to die alone.

Now it was time for Gary Fowler again. I got some neckties and knotted his ankles and wrists together. He was due to sleep for a long time. I just wanted to make sure he was still there when I got back.

Then I called the desk and told them to notify the band leader that one of their horn players would be missing for the evening shows. Next I took the *Do Not Disturb* sign and hung it outside the door.

So far, so good.

I showered, leaving the door open should Fowler come to life. No fear. I had me a dead duck on my hands. Sports time was over, so I donned a sharp silk suit, black, naturally, one that went well with my hi-boy collar and dark tie.

The picture wasn't bad. It consisted of a handsome playboy who looked slightly conceited but anxious for a good time worthy of his attention. Preferably off-beat.

The curse of being too good-looking is that you scare off the worthwhile girls. How can they like a guy who looks as if he's got the pick of everything around? Then there's the type of girl who's just as beautiful as you are. And they're as conceited as they look. The only ones they appeal to are themselves. But sometimes they like to match up with you just to keep in practice. I'm not at

all against the practice, either. I like to get some of it in myself, now and then. As often as possible.

So, what with having to be discriminate and others discriminating against you, there's only one other type that really goes for the boyish good looks with which I'm cursed.

The queens.

That's why I'm who I am, Buzz Cardigan, normal from the top of his curly black hair to the tips of his agile toes, but assigned to pass as a queer.

Not even a bi-sexual, for Pete's sake!

I sighed a deep sigh for my wasted youth and virilty, checked the knots on Gary Fowler's bonds, and left, locking the door behind me. Maybe locking up my life, for all I knew.

2. Thursday, July 12, 7:02 p.m.; the Casino

I had set myself up as a clay pigeon, understand. I'd gone down to the casino and paraded about, playing the slots, losing a bill or two at the dice tables, taking a chance on roulette, having a drink at the bar and another at the lounge while the shows went on.

Sitting duck Cardigan, that was me. But nobody took another shot. True, I was alert every second. I also counted on the fact that the chances were pretty remote of being hit by the first shot, especially in a crowd and under bad conditions. Thus I would have a chance to spot where the shot came from and have at my foe before he got off the second slug.

Nice figuring, eh? Just like a hero in a spy novel. But it didn't come off. Someone else was outfiguring me. This was not quite like a novel. Heroes never die in spy fiction.

In true life, though, heroes *can* die. And villains can emerge triumphant, going on to fame and fortune. You don't believe me? Check on some of the most famous people you've read about. Heroes or villains?

But where was my villain? Rolling the dice, putting my money on the black even number, dropping my nickel into the slot machine, I mumbled over and over, "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" But nothing did. Not even a jackpot.

And do you know something even more upending? There wasn't a single man about wearing a daisy!

"Drink, handsome?" said a voice at my ear.

I was sitting on a stool playing the slot machine when Tally-Ho appeared at my side.

"Where've you been, lover?" she went on.

Lover! There she stood, all that femininity with nothing on but that shortie skirt showing all those legs, netted, no less, to make them look even more intriguing and mysterious; with that low, low, low-cut neckline that was a sin and a shame; all that swelling bosom and white throat and curvaceousness, and everything and all, and she dared call me "Lover!"

"I was at the daisy party," I said.

I was being smart. This was said to get a reaction from her about me and about the daisy wearers. There was nothing. Those lovely eyes were as vague as ever, albeit they were filled with adoration. All right, so a broad has to be vague to think she cares for me. Who am I to be particular?

"That's nice," she said, her red lips dripping honey so much I wanted to taste it. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Well, let's say it was exciting."

She got busy with some nearby ashtrays, emptying them into a small container. But I saw that she was pouting. By God, she was jealous! I had to break that trend of thought, you may be sure.

"See any daisy wearers around?" I asked when she got back [illegible]

"Funny you should ask that," she said. Her brow was a series of puzzle lines. "I haven't seen any at all for the

past couple of hours. They've all disappeared. Isn't that funny?"

"Very." I dropped another nickel into the slot. "Just forget about it, will you. Hey!" I snapped my fingers, remembering.

"Yes?" she asked eagerly, and prettily.

"Have you heard of anyone getting a broken nose recently?"

I was thinking of course of the guy I had slammed with my fist. The guy with the gun. The guy who surely must have a smashed schnozzle by now. But Tally-Ho looked confused as well as vague.

"Uh-uh," she said. "Gosh, Buzz, you ask the funniest things. What's a broken nose got to do with anything?"

I dropped another coin into limbo. "Nothing at all, honey. Just felt like asking a stupid question, that's all."

"All right. May I ask a stupid question now?"

"Why not?"

"When are you going to take me out and make love to me, Buzz? Gosh, you're so good-looking I could cry. What have I got to do, get down on my knees and . . ."

"No! No!" I looked around to see if anyone was noticing. Hell, I should have known my gamblers better. They were so busy they wouldn't have cared if she got down on her knees stark naked, stripped me to the raw, and done anything else at all. Lady Luck was much more desirable than Lady Love to these idiots.

She eased up close to me. Too close. Her front was against my side. And that was as bad as anything could be —or as good as anything could be, depending on your view on such matters. My view was strictly in favor of the situation.

But not here! And not now!

"Get away, girl," I said. "You bother me." What a great liar! What a profound actor! What a nut!

"Why shouldn't I bother you? You sure bother me."

And she managed to do a jiggle with her knees that brought a certain action to her hips and to her front that was enough to strike down the wrath of the heavens upon us both.

"What's the matter?" she went on. "Is that Honeydew chick keeping you supplied with stuff?"

"Er—no." My goodness, how the modern girl did talk and carry on! No inhibitions, thank goodness . . . or thank badness.

She looked up at me very demurely. "Because if she is letting you have it, I wouldn't blame her. Or you, either."

I found it difficult to follow the path of feminine logic, enthralling though it was.

"Er—ah—why wouldn't you blame her . . . or me, Tally-Ho?"

I felt rather silly carrying on this sort of conversation. It made no sense at all. What if my unknown enemy heard me? My rating as a first-ranking opponent would dive to an unheard-of low.

Tally-Ho blinked her eyes and sighed. And you know what that sigh did, don't you? Two things. It caused her bosom to swell up and out in a startling manner. And it caused my knees to weaken and my own sigh to catch in my throat.

One more assignment like this and I'll insist on being castrated first, I swear!

But Tally-Ho was talking, gibbering away in her lightheaded and lighthearted fashion.

"I wouldn't blame Honeydew for giving in to you because what girl wouldn't? You're the handsomest thing I've ever seen, Buzz Cardigan, man! You want the key to my room? You want my money? You want to sleep with my sister, *señor?* Name it; whatever you want is yours. So that's why I can't blame Honeydew."

"But about the other part," I said, dropping another

coin in the slot without even a small payoff coming up.

"What other part, dear? You can have any part of me you want. I keep telling you—"

"Cool it, Tally-Ho. I mean about not blaming me if I went to bed with her. How can you talk like that?"

"Because I'm not a virgin."

I stopped, coin in mid-air on its way to the slot, and gaped at her. "What are you talking about?"

"And she is."

"She is—what?"

"A virgin."

All right, what would you make of that, wise guys? Remember that this curious dialogue is going on amid the slot machines at one of the largest casinos in Lake Tahoe. It began innocently enough, I thought, and now it was taking a turn that threatened to lead it into mighty dangerous areas. As for me, I didn't know what the hell we were talking about.

Furthermore, I'm supposed to be tracking down a missing scientist, for Pete's sake, and here I am, talking to a sexy broad about her lack of virginity and another chick's possession of it.

Now you can ask something else: Why am I including this detail in my report?

Hang on, dear friends. There is method to my madness.

I struck a lighter and put the flame to my cigarette. I was trying to appear cool, like the sophisticate I'm supposed to be. Actually, I was attempting to calm myself down. All this talk about virginity and lack of it was damned unsettling. Especially to a man in my situation. How long had it been since I'd had a woman? Too long, pals, too long. I'm a dedicated secret agent but I'm even more dedicated as a man.

However . . .

"What's anything got to do with anything?" I asked Tally-Ho, trying to keep my eyes away from that double

mound of succulent flesh that arose from the low neckline. And failing.

She shrugged. And when she shrugged, it wasn't just her shoulders, although that could be bad enough. It was her entire upper torso. And if you kept looking, it was also her lower torso. And below *that*. It was unnerving, that's what it was.

"A gal as sharp as Honeydew, looking the way she does and everything, heck, since she's a virgin and has been one all this while, why wouldn't any man want to be the first?"

Why not indeed? Virgins were rare at any age. While I mulled this over, another thought was sneaking into my mind. It had no business sneaking in there because it was a clean thought and all the others were rather on the flesh-and-sexpot side.

However, there it was, sneaking in on hands and knees and demanding to know what was going on here. "Go away!" I said to that clean thought. "This is no time for the likes of you."

"But you're a working agent," said the clean thought, "and something's been said that doesn't sit well with me. See it through, Cardigan, my boy."

"But I'm not your boy," replied the devil in me.

"Oh yes you are . . ."

"Go away—"

But it was too late. The good me was never wrong. It was the bad me that gave me trouble. The bad me was a lot of fun, but it often kept me off the straight and narrow. But now the good me had taken over, and my mind was churning. But with what? Hell, I don't know. It was just my old instinct acting up again.

"Listen—" I said to Tally-Ho.

But Tally-Ho had gone off to respond to the signal of a slots-playing old biddie who wanted a drink to oil her gears. She glanced at me with those soft eyes, did Tally-Ho, to tell me she'd be right back.

I kept playing, kept winning small amounts but losing them right back again. No jackpots, though. I had just changed another ten-dollar bill into rolls of dimes when Tally-Ho came back.

"You were saying?" she asked.

"About Honeydew. It's none of my business, but how do you know she's a virgin?"

"Non-virgins swing, don't they? Honeydew doesn't swing."

"Do you have to know everything a person does? Is nothing sacred?"

"Not in this business, lover. I've worked Vegas, Reno, and Tahoe. So has Honeydew. I know which chick swings and which chick doesn't. Honeydew doesn't. Me, though, I swing. With the right guy, of course. I figure you could be the right guy, Buzz. What say, let's be lovers?"

"Maybe she's got a husband that she's loyal to."

"Uh-uh! No husband. Never gets letters, never writes letters. Never gets or makes calls. Nothing. Me, though—"

"Sure, honey, sure. Get me a drink, will you? Vodka on the rocks."

She pouted prettily. "Anything for you, Buzz. Remember I told you that. I'll be right back, pet."

I dropped a dime into the bigger-paying slot. What the hell, if I was going to lose, I might as well lose big. It was Government expense money, anyway.

And I hit the jackpot! Thirty dollars! Wheeeee! Oh, what a delicious sound it was as the bells rang in full glory! And the big red light atop the slot went on and off, on and off, announcing to the world and to the pay-off cashier that I had hit!

There was only one small detail wrong, however. If it was Government money I was playing with, it was also Government money I was winning.

Oh, well! Easy come, easy go. The cashier came over

and paid me in cold cash. Tally-Ho also got back at the same time with my drink. She was very happy for me. So was I. It wasn't the money. It was the turn in luck. I'd been in bad luck all day, but now, with Tally-Ho telling me about Honeydew Demay's virginity (a most unusual thing in the midst of all that lovely and ravishing depravity), my hitting the jackpot had symbolism to it.

It could mean that Honeydew's virginity was a clue to something. To what? How the hell should I know? I just follow my instincts and they were telling me I was on to something good. All I had to do was keep on as I was doing, stumbling blindly ahead, and this case would be wrapped up in no time.

The cashier left. So did Tally-Ho, to attend to another thirsty gambler. I turned back to the slot, drink in one hand, dime in the other, to resume playing.

I should have stayed in bed. I should have resigned from the service. I should have gotten married and settled down in some small town where the action was slow and more to my speed.

Remember, I was after someone. That was my assignment, given to me in all faith by my Department. The safety of the United States of America and all the free world depended upon me.

God help the United States of America and all the free world!

Yes, I was after someone, but I didn't know what or where that someone was. But someone was after *me*—and *they* knew who and where *I* was just fine. The point I'm trying to make is that I, the chaser, was now being chased.

Another point I'm trying to make is that as I turned back to play the slot, there, resting on the cup-like spot where you could rest your drink, was a daisy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Best Laid Plans

1. Thursday, July 12, 8:00 p.m.; the Silver Room

I LOOKED AROUND, my head spinning wildly.

But all I saw was the usual, the sleepy-eyed slot-machine players, the casual strollers looking for the one machine that would pay off. But nobody who looked as if he—or she—could have planted the damned daisy beside my slot.

Of course, it could have been anyone. But what was I going to do, rush up to each one, shove the daisy under his—or her—nose, and yelp, "Did you put that daisy near me?" How would that have sounded? One customer for the boobyhatch coming up, that's how it would have sounded.

So I ground my teeth and ground my cigarette out on the daisy. All right, so you know something about me, you bastards. Come on and let me have it, so I'll know something about you. Stop dropping those damned daisies all around me and let's fight this out like men.

But . . . you're not men, are you? And you're not women, either. You're a breed unto your own. You're nice enough when you live for love, when you're in the arts and the professions and in entertainment and even in everyday kind of living.

But there are some areas where you just don't belong. The dangerous areas, the places where spies crawl and

death lurks. In order to function here, one has to have an even keel, a proper grasp of matters. But those of you who try to work my territory run headlong into violent trouble. And do you know why? Because you have the worst traits of men (being part men) and the worst traits of women (being part women).

You are jealous and self-protective, you bristle at any challenge to your position, you have no sense of humor when your authority is questioned. You scratch, you bite, you knee, you play dirty. Shakespeare's Catherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* was a Mary Poppins compared to you.

That's why you're trying to drive me crazy with these cockamanie daisies right now. Dropping them from the sky, pinning them on doors, serving them with my drinks . . . ye gods! Can't you fight fair?

No, you couldn't. I took a deep breath and felt myself calming down a bit. I couldn't fight fair, either. Hell, how could I blame you? We're in a dirty business, and I'm no better than you are. And no worse, I hope!

Just don't festoon me with daisies, please!

I took another deep breath, finished off my drink in one hearty gulp, told myself to keep my sense of humor, and strolled airily into the Silver Room. I wanted to catch the supper show because I was hungry, and I wanted to see Honeydew Demay again because I was curious.

What the hell was bugging me about her?

Relax, Cardigan, I told myself, being formal as anything with me. *It'll come to you. That old brain will start clicking and maybe the pieces will fall into the proper pattern. Or maybe they'll scatter into a pattern even more confusing.*

If you can enjoy dinner while a gang of girls are cavorting on stage in the semi-nude, if you can swallow the soup to the beat of bouncing breasts, if you can slice the steak while watching the twisting and writhing of waists, thighs and buttocks, if you can spoon chocolate

mousse while a dozen broads are hop-skip-and-jumping about, then you can enjoy the supper show at the Silver Room.

Me, I enjoyed it, my tastes being what they are.

There was only one thing I made sure of, however; I got a table away in back, back against the wall farthest from the stage, back where no one could sneak up on me and plant a daisy in my cup of coffee.

And I watched everything and everyone. Every so often I checked my .38, and there it rested, safe and snug and ready. No one resembling a bearer of daisies came close to me.

Tally-Ho, though, she came close to me. She had switched from serving in the casino to hustling customers in the Silver Room. I watched her more than carefully. For two reasons: she could have been the one to bring the daisy, and she was something to watch carefully in any case. There was a lot to watch and all of it worthwhile.

She didn't talk, though. She smiled at me and served me my drinks and made herself available for watching. I had plans for that girl, good plans, well-laid plans. . . .

And then Honeydew came on to sing. And when that chick came on, I mean just that, brother! Like a house afire. Like a torch lit to blow up the sky and the heart and soul of every man and woman within sound of her voice.

The heat from her technique scorched me and knocked me out. She was alive with desire, with need, with longing, with fulfillment. She was Cleopatra, Catherine the Great, and all the concubines of all time and all the world.

She was dressed in red this time. I had seen the thing hanging in her dressing room, but it never looked like this! I mean this had *body!* And I can't tell you the names of the songs she sang. All I know is that they were about desire, desire, and more desire.

This was a *virgin?*

I looked at Tally-Ho with the question on my face. She was leaning against the wall next to my table. She shrugged with a what-do-you-want-from-me? expression.

Tally-Ho had to be putting me on. But somehow I had the feeling she wasn't. Girls who are around other girls as much as Tally-Ho was around them know. So I had to accept the fact that Honeydew was a virgin.

And as I looked at her and though about this, she seemed to dim out on me. Even the sound of her song faded into the background. I was concentrating hard, and that's what happens to me: people and sounds vanish and my brain starts functioning. This was a good sign, so I paid attention to what I was thinking.

Item One: Honeydew Demay was a virgin. Let's accept that and put it aside a moment.

Item Two: Honeydew Demay had expressed disappointment because I wouldn't date her, make a play for her—in short, go to bed with her.

Item Three: Was this the way for a virgin to behave?

Item Four: Tally-Ho had said she had worked in the same places Honeydew had worked at Reno, Vagas, and Lake Tahoe.

Item Five: Honeydew had said this was her first time at the Lake. While I was driving her here from Reno she sad said, and I quote: "I've always dreamed of coming here."

Item Six: Why had she lied to me? And if she hadn't I lied.

Item Seven: Why had Tally-Ho lied to me?

Item Eight: What did any of this have to do with my assignment to locate Jebediah Oregon?

Bah! I was sidetracking myself again. But I couldn't resist the impulse to stick to this trend of thought. There was a connection somewhere; there were just too many contradictions for anything to be what it appeared to be.

Besides, it was all happening to me, and I am most suspicious of whatever happens to me.

You see, I don't even trust myself.

I had to put my suspicions to the test. I jotted a note to Honeydew and had a waiter send it back to her dressing room. In a few minutes I had my reply.

My note read: *How about you and I swinging together tonight?*

Her reply read: *Groovy! Your place or mine?*

I sent back another note: *Neither. Just remembered an important call I've got to make. Some other time, sweets.*

With Tally-Ho glaring at me with tears in her eyes, I paid my check and left.

2. *Thursday, July 12, 9:30 p.m.; My Place, Not Hers*

Gary Fowler had a smile on his kisser that would have looked better on a gargoyle. He was still out cold, but the dreams he must have been having would have been censored in Babylon, for goodness' sake. Nobody could be enjoying himself *that* much! I tossed a blanket over him and left him to his dreams.

When the guy woke up I had a few more questions to ask him. Meanwhile, I got on the phone and asked for Calvin Hurtog.

"Ooooh!" he exclaimed when I told him who I was. "You hit awfully good and hard, Buzz!"

"Thanks a lot."

"No—thank *you!* We must do it again sometime. Only this time make it last longer."

"Calvin, were there any more daisies?"

"That was what got you excited, wasn't it? I'll order dozens if you want them! Hundreds of dozens!"

"Never mind. Has anyone contacted you about the one you got?"

"Not a soul. All it got me was a nice beating from you. But that was worth everything."

"Do me a favor, will you, Calvin?"

"You know I'll do anything."

"Should you be contacted by anyone in regard to daisies, will you please find out who he is and where he's staying? Then let me know?"

"I'll do that, Buzz."

"And keep it *sub rosa*, will you?"

"Oh, a secret! I like secrets!"

I hung up on him while he was still gushing and gooing. My phone felt sticky when I got through talking to the poor character. If some of the homos I'd run into ever got hold of him, they'd make mincemeat out of him. That was one guy who, if he'd had the hell beat out of him, would die happy.

It takes all kinds. And that's my world, the world of the night crawlers, the lost, the laughers with tears in their eyes, the hustlers of depravity.

"Ughhhh!" interrupted a voice from the couch.

Gary Fowler was staring at me, his eyes glaring hard. "Who the hell are you, Mac?" he demanded.

"Buzz Cardigan, remember?"

"All right, so you're Buzz Cardigan. That doesn't mean a thing to me. What am I doing tied up on this couch? I couldn't have been raped by you, you lovely thing; I still have my clothes on."

"We were friends for a little while." I got to him and started untying the ties. "But now that you're sober you don't remember, do you?"

He sat up and rubbed his wrists. He still looked terrible.

"Never do," he mumbled. "Best that way. Listen, you got a drink on the premises?"

"I've got some questions to ask you. Then you drink."

"You're killing me." He peered at me closely. "You look familiar. Have we been—familiar?"

"Nope."

His eyes glittered. He was coming to life. "Can we

be, if I'm a good boy and answer your questions? Familiar, I mean?"

"That depends. You and I, Gary, were at the Sunflower Room earlier today at a meeting of the Daisy Club. There were some shots."

Gary slapped his head hard. "Omigod! I remember! *You!* I was sitting with you . . . and someone tried to . . . someone tried to . . . *Omigod!*"

He was sick again. It was for sure he knew nothing about who was after me. A guy as weak and as sick as that would never be let in on any grandoise scheme. He gulped a few times and restored his inner equilibrium.

"Tell me about the Daisy Club, Gary," I said.

"The Daisy Club . . . oh, yes. Well, it's just a group of homos like me. Middle-class and upper-class, nothing in the roaring faggot type, you know. Decent, respectable people. Some married men, even."

"Who's the head man?"

"Nobody. We've got no officers or anything like that. What did you say your name was?"

"Buzz Cardigan."

"Can't remember names, but that face! It's adorable! I'll never forget it, dear."

"How do you guys get together?"

"You mean how are our meetings set up? Oh, we get letters from a post-office box in Sacramento, notifying us of the meetings. Those of us who can attend, do; the others just pine away. Because we really have a ball, you know. Hey!" He looked alarmed. "What time is it? I've got a job!"

"Cool it. I called in for you and said you were sick."

"Good boy. You cover everything, don't you? Why don't you come over here and cover me—with you?"

"I'm not in the mood. I want to know more about the club."

"That's easy. There's a party going on tonight after hours. You'll learn all you want to know, and it might

get you in the mood. We all end up paired off or quadrupled off, or whatever your taste might be. Now can I have that drink?"

I checked my watch. It was ten o'clock; four hours till party time. Eager to spill everything so I'd get to be his pal, Gary told me the party would be at one of the huge lodges on the California side of the border. There'd be drinks and music and everything conducive to gay festivities, all on a proper plane, of course.

But when I told Gary I wanted him sober, he almost burst into tears. "Hell, man, that'd kill me. Booze is my life's blood! I'll never last the night! I'm a four-quart-a-day man."

"How long will a pint last you?"

"A pint? Omigod! I drank that much when I was being bottle-fed as an infant! We're not talking about the same kind of bottle, man!"

"It'll have to do you until two in the morning, chappy. Come on, you and I are going for a drive until the party starts."

I pulled him to his feet. He clung to me and gazed at me in adoration.

"A drive? You and me? At night? Until two o'clock? Goodness, we can play a little hanky-panky on the way, can't we? Oh, you great big wonderful, thoughtful man, you!"

3. Thursday, July 12, 10:30 p.m.; Kingsbury Grade

"Man, you like to live dangerously?"

I was driving; Gary was beside me; his precious pint, the top off, was clutched to his breast. I was on Route 50, that great highway built on the trail of the early pioneers when they made their treacherous way from their homes on the plains to the rugged mountains of California.

I had intended to take the longish drive around the

lake. It would have taken us a couple of hours if I handled it right. But Gary had other ideas.

"Turn here," he said, pointing to an intersection that cut off the main road toward the east. "Scary as hell, this Kingsbury Grade. Once it was the only way up here from Mormon Station in Nevada. You wonder how the old boys did it back in the mid-1800's. Made it by foot, by horse, by rickety stage coaches and wagons. Rough as hell, too, not paved the way it is today. Just take it easy, will you, Buzz darling?"

The moon was bright, almost as bright as day. I was glad of it at first because I could see where I was going. But after a while I was sorry as hell . . . *because I could see where I was going!* Those pioneers must have been out of their minds when they traveled this road. And I was even crazier than they because they had no other way of traveling and I could have stayed in my safe and comfortable room and minded my own business.

Imagine, if you can, a narrow, twisting road with what must have been more than a dozen hairpin turns. Bad enough? Imagine rocks looming up above you, ready to topple downward at any moment. Not bad enough yet, eh?

Then have some of this. Remember that we started a mile above sea level. That means we were pretty high up in the mountains, right? Like on a mountaintop? And the Kingsbury Grade went down the side of a mountain, down and down and down. And the farther down you went, the higher you seemed to be.

Because as you drove down, your foot pressing nervously on the brake, your car in low gear and wishing you could drag a foot to make it go even slower, you looked off to one side and what did you see? Nothing! Only sky!

All right, lean over and look down a little. And I do mean *down! Down* on mountaintops, for God's sake!

Down on the ledge of the tops of the High Sierras, *down* on the mountainsides, *down* on the tops of towering trees, *down* on the twisting road so thin and tiny below, *down* on the valleys that seemed embedded in the bowels of the earth!

I mean we were high, higher than I'd ever gotten on booze. I hung onto the wheel, not because it was the way to steer but because I was frozen to it. One slight miscalculation and we'd go over the side eight thousand feet down to oblivion. There were no fences guarding the ledge, either. Just a foot or so of earth and sometimes not even that.

My teeth were clenched, my eyes were keen, and my heart was going bumpety-bump faster than any grind artist you ever saw. Just let me out of this safely, Lord, I prayed silently, for the first time since my war hitch; just let me come down to earth again and I'll be a very good boy. I'll think straight thoughts and do nothing but good for my fellow man. I'll love everyone, I'll forgive everyone, I'll even pay back all the money I owe.

"Imagine," Gary said.

"Shut up," I said, surprised at the weakness in my voice.

"Imagine, this was run by guys going lickety-split up and down this grade in wagons, for God's sake!"

I couldn't talk. I was too busy concentrating as I negotiated still another hairpin turn. I thought I'd never make it but the bank at the side of the road pulled me out just in time and I went careening along at two fast miles an hour.

Gary took another swig of the bottle. "Ya know what happened up at Stateline a few years ago? A couple of robbers pulled a job at one of the banks and made quite a haul. And they scooted off. Well, the cops weren't too worried because they were called right away and there are only a few roads out of Lake Tahoe."

Who cared? To my right was a sheer drop ending in nowhere. If we crashed down there we'd never be found. I repeat, who cared?

But Gary cared. He went right on. "The cops put roadblocks up fast on Route 50, both ways, going east and west. And they also blocked off the passes going up into the mountains. You think they blocked off Kingsbury? Not on your life. What self-respecting bank robbers would try to escape this way? Well, our boys did, and they got away clean."

Lucky bank robbers, I thought to myself. That's what comes of living dirty. It's the only way to live these days. Nice guys like me finish last.

"All the cops had to do," Gary went on, studying his half-empty bottle regretfully, "was block it off at the foot of the grade and they would have caught the crooks." He took a slug of the Old Crow and snickered. "And that bit of history, my buddy, my pal, shows you that modern robbers are every bit as slick as the old-timers. The Wild West is still alive."

I think I must have held my breath all the way down that treacherous bit of Americana. But I made it at last, having lost at least ten pounds and all my insides along the way.

When we were on a level road at last, I stopped the car and snatched the bottle out of Gary's hands.

"Gimme that!" I growled.

"Hey!" Gary screamed.

But it was no use. The burning contents were gone in one swallow.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Friday's child is loving and giving

1. Friday, July 13, 2:15 a.m.; Mile High Lodge

Notice the date? Friday the 13th, right? Well, I paid it no mind while things were happening. One day scrambled into the next and night was only a continuation of day while all this was going on.

But that's a gambling town for you. Nothing ever ends, and it's sometimes doubtful if anything ever begins, for that matter. For instance, Gary had said that the big fag party was an after-hours affair. Well, there just are no after hours in Tahoe, Reno, or Las Vegas. It's around the clock and around the wheel over and over again.

But certain activities do end by that time in so far as work is concerned. The big shows are over and the chief lounge acts are done. Besides, there is an air, mysterious and secret, that is considered vital for certain activities. This is the air of lateness and night, the bewitching hour, so to speak.

Nevertheless, here I was with Gary Fowler at this place perched on a mountainside on the California side of Lake Tahoe, a place coyly named Mile High Lodge. And it was that high in many ways.

We had walked into what was a rather sedate gathering of well-mannered gentlemen. I was introduced to several, and the drinks flowed. The more drinks were poured down throats, the more evident were the signs of

the homosexual. There were the whispered talks, the hand-holding, the thigh-feeling. They stayed away from me because I was a stranger, but already a few eyes were cast in my direction, contemplative, approving, and speculative.

It would not be long, I reckoned, before the boom was lowered on Buzz Cardigan. Then what, old boy?

I helped myself to a stiff drink or two. The bartender role was played by a guy who introduced himself to me as Rufe Sawyer, stage manager of the Silver Room.

"Just relax, Buzz," he said to me. "Live, laugh, and be gay."

"Sure," I said, wondering how this tall, thin, owl-faced, middle-aged man was able to adjust to being an aging homosexual. He had a lined face, baggy eyes, and a sad wistfulness to him that was heartbreaking.

When he edged over to me, suggesting we take our drinks out to the porch and study the night view, I begged off, saying I had to wait for the mood. I also had to beg off on Gary's approaches. I also had to try to act interested and alive, a very difficult thing for me to do when there were no women around.

After a while the lights were dimmed and records were played. This was the signal for dancing. Have you ever watched men dancing together, holding each other close, stealing kisses to cheeks, whispering sweet nothings in ears? It's a sight. I had to bolster myself with another drink. Rufe obliged with an understanding smile, hoping that I was beginning to come around.

The swinging was just beginning to get a little frantic when Oscar W. Junior made his entrance. That's right—Oscar W. Junior, that was his name, as I discovered. The minute he walked in, everything stopped.

There was a hushed awe at his entrance, and it was justly deserved. Elegant in dress and demeanor, he was the picture of sartorial splendor. He wore an Edwardian

jacket, bright blue with a black velvet collar, very tight trousers clinging to his thin legs, polished black boots, and a Mod shirt, ruffled at the breast and cuffs.

Mr. Junior was completely bald, very thin and short. His age was about in the late twenties. Except for his eyes. They looked older, as though they had seen a great deal and were not amused. They glittered like two brown agates.

My eyes burned at the sight of all that splendor. They burned even more as I took in the decoration he wore on his lapel.

A sunflower . . .

Huge in size, he sported it as to the manner born.

There he stood, smiling around the room, one dainty hand on his hip, the other hand fingering the petals of the flower. Where the other guests were weak versions of the homosexual element, he was its personification. He oozed evil, he emitted lust, he was perversity incarnate.

It was Gary Fowler who stepped up to him and announced the guest to the crowd.

"Gentlemen, may I present Oscar W. Junior. Yes sirs, that is the name by which our distinguished guest chooses to be known. Mr. Junior is named after his one and only idol, Oscar Wilde. Most of you have heard of Mr. Junior, I'm sure. And you've also heard of the delightful game he plays at gatherings like these. That's the reason most of you are here. Well, be patient, dears. One of you will be lucky tonight."

Gary took Oscar's hand and led him into the center of the crowd. The men gathered about him as if he were the belle of the ball, showering attention on him such as no one has received since Scarlett O'Hara's coming out party!

I hung back, wondering about this new phase. I had certainly plunged deep into the homosexual life of this area, and I had seen the man who was queen of the May,

at least. He glanced at me once from within the pack gathered about him, and he smiled, lifting his glass to me in a toast.

Playing my part as well as possible, I lifted my glass right back at him.

Please let Griffin be right, I said to myself. Please don't let me get into this weird situation and have it all happen for nothing. Please let this lead to Jebediah Oregon. . . .

Jebediah Oregon! Hell, I'd almost forgotten the guy and what I was here for! I was so busy chasing daisies and wondering when the next one would smack me in the face, and so involved with who was going to take a shot at me, I'd forgotten my original mission.

Of course I still had my gun hidden on me. And I was waiting for a move to be made so I'd know when to hit back. But the only move made was that by Gary Fowler. I hadn't noticed it, but he had gone into another room and now he was back.

And he was carrying something.

You've guessed it.

A bunch of daisies . . .

"It's time, gentlemen!" he announced. When the crowd saw the daisies, they fell away from Oscar with a series of "Oooohs!" and "Ahhhhhs!" Oscar himself gazed demurely at the flowers and took a deep gulp of his drink.

Without a word of command from anyone, the men lined up against the four walls. I gathered "the game" played by Oscar W. Junior was about to begin. I had been leaning against a wall anyway, and now I too was part of the line-up.

Oscar was in the center of the room. The bunch of daisies lay at his feet. He had a fresh glass in his hand as he looked around at us, eyeing us slowly, one by one. Then he finished off the drink with a flourish and threw the glass into the fireplace where it smashed against the brick.

The men gasped in unison at this melodramatic gesture.

Then they started breathing heavily as Oscar bent to pick up one of the flowers. And as he bent over, he teetered just a little bit. Oscar, I noticed, was plastered to the gills.

I don't mean he was roaring drunk. Oh no, Her Royal Majesty had too much class for that. He knew how to maintain his physical composure. He wasn't the stumbling, awkward kind of a drunk. But he was bombed out of his skull. The slight teeter betrayed it, and the silly grin and the glazed eyes confirmed it.

Holding the daisy in one hand, he began to pluck the petals with the other. As he plucked each petal he pointed to a man in the line and said, "He loves me." Then onto the next man and the next petal with, "He loves me not."

Get it? Oscar W. Junior was picking his lover for the night!

He went around and around the men in the room, using up daisy after daisy. Until the very last petal and the very last "He loves me!"

And do you know who the winner was?

ME!

The others applauded lucky me when he walked over with mincing steps and bashful mien. "I'm glad it was you," he breathed. "You're the prettiest man here."

I gulped and tried to smile back at him. "Yeah," I said brightly. "Er . . . what's the next step?"

He took my hand. I shivered. His hand was clammy.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "I've got myself a bashful one! You don't happen to be a virgin, do you, dear? You couldn't be, not looking as beautiful as you do!"

He drew me closer and looked up at me. The heavy odor of whiskey on his breath was mixed up with something that was part perfume and part pastrami sandwich. On rye.

"Why, this is *delightful!*" he went on. "I just *adore* shy ones! There are so many bold queens around, it's just no fun balling any more! But you'll be different, I *know* you will! And it doesn't matter if you don't know what

to do; I'll show you everything, darling! But *everything!*"

"Mr. Oscar W. Wilde, Mr. Buzz Cardigan!" It was the voice of Gary Fowler. He was standing at an open door. "Your bridal chamber awaits!"

"I . . . I'd like to take a bottle with us," I said.

And a blackjack, I was wishing. But I couldn't very well order that. However, Gary did supply us with not one bottle of Scotch, but two. And the other queens sighed and moaned gently as Oscar clung to my arm like a bashful bride and I led her into the other room.

If you think I'm getting my genders mixed, how well do you think *you'd* do?

The door closed behind us. I heard the key turn in the lock . . . from the outside. We were in a large bedroom, one with what could very well be called a wall-to-wall bed. That bed was designed for only one purpose and it wasn't sleeping.

2. Friday, July 13, 4:00 a.m.; the Bridal Chamber

There were no lights on, but none was needed. The huge window was undraped, and that glorious California moon shed a bluish glow over everything. Including the character who threw himself at me, wrapped his arms around me and hissed, "Kiss me, you fool!"

Shades of Theda Bara! Now, I'm not about to go around kissing bald-headed women, no less bald-headed *men!* But this fish had to be played right. He was the biggest one I'd landed so far. He was a major part of the scene here, a big part of the daisy puzzle, and he just *had* to know something about Jebediah Oregon.

Or I was a dead duck.

"Can we have a drink first, please?" I asked in my smallest and politest voice.

Oscar was delighted. "Of *course*, pet! I can use a snifter or two myself."

We had a snifter or two. Or Oscar did. I managed to pretend to be drinking as I tilted the bottle to my lips. But he kept downing them as fast as he could hoist the bottle.

"Now?" Oscar asked after a while. He looked blearier than ever. He was sitting down on the edge of the bed now, bottle in hand, his head lolling.

"It'll take a few more," I said. "You see, I'm just getting over a broken romance and I—"

"Say no more, sweetheart. I know how those things are. Mother Oscar understands. Drink up."

He tilted his bottle. I did the same to mine but kept my mouth shut, a good policy most of the time.

"Can we talk a little bit?" I asked.

"Sure." He patted the place beside him on the bed. But it wasn't too energetic a gesture. The fellow was passing out before my eyes. "Sit here and we'll talk."

But I took a seat opposite him in an easy chair. He barely noticed. His eyes were at half mast and his mouth agape. The queen was very close to retiring. Alone, I might add.

"What . . . do . . . you want to talk . . . about?" he asked sleepily.

"You."

He showed a small bit of interest by working his flaccid mouth into something resembling a grin. "*Me?* What a *delightful* subject." But then he frowned. "I'm a sad case, however, really, old boy. All of us are, you know."

He was talking as though in sleep, his eyes closing again, his body sagging. But he kept talking.

"Our lives are cursed by the outrageous faggots who create a bad name for we who are sensitive and decent. We are gentlemen, we true homosexuals. We have dignity. We want only to be left alone to love one another. But we're always in danger and all on account of the bad ones who stir up the law against us. Why, the police lump us with the faggots and it's just awful."

"Very bad indeed."

He never heard me. He was off on what was obviously a favorite subject and was not to be interrupted. I listened and waited for my chance.

"Besides all that, we are in danger of blackmailers and of the rough trade who beat us up and rob us. And then there are the married men among us, men who have families and good positions and respectability. But they have to cut loose once in a while and express their homosexuality. What harm is there in that? But they always run the risk of exposure and ruin."

I could have contributed a thought or two on my own. Something about the married homos who ask for trouble, who themselves endanger their positions and the honor of their families by moving into the danger area of the twilight zone. But I knew this would make no impression on Oscar W. Junior.

He had stopped talking and his eyes were closed. The bottle was forgotten in his hand.

"Oscar!" I snapped.

"Yes, lover." He tried valiantly to come to.

"Oscar, there are other types of men who are in danger because of their sex lives."

"Oh, sure. Hmmmm . . . dozens . . . hundreds . . . thousands . . ."

He was close to snoring now, the words barely intelligible. I pressed on regardless, throwing the bait right at him for him to gobble up.

"People who hold positions in government, Oscar. They have very responsible jobs to do for the United States, but the fact that they're also homos make them a very bad security risk. They endanger themselves, their lives and their government. What do you think of that, Oscar?"

"....."

"Oscar!"

"....."

"Oscar?"

But Oscar, his eyes closed tightly now, the bottle fallen from his listless hand, was toppling backward onto the bed. He was totally beyond recall. The whiskey had done its job too well. A steady snore greeted me as I bent close to look at him.

"Jebediah!" I said into his ear. "Jebediah Oregon!"

Nothing. Not even a flicker. "Lulu!" I tried that one, but there was no response. I repeated the name of the man I was looking for, hoping it would bring some reaction from him, possibly making him talk in his sleep. But I had no luck at all.

I sat back and contemplated the situation. Damn it all, this guy just had to have something to do with old Jeb. The daisy-chain trail led too clearly from Ossie's Place up to Lake Tahoe. And the business of the Oscar Wilde references plus the daisy symbolism was too similar to be confidential.

What did I have? Bullets, Gary, Calvin, and now Oscar. And Oscar was the biggest, I was positive of that. But he was also out cold and of no earthly use to me.

I ran my hands through his pockets and found a key to Suite 966 of the Silver Truckee. Well, well, well, birds of a feather gather together under one protective roof, it seemed. I knew where he was staying, at least. I replaced the key.

In a spirit of patronization, I patted his bald head. "Sleep well, Oscar. I'll get to you later. I—"

I stopped talking and stopped patting. Instead I rubbed the glistening dome. I stopped, frowned, and rubbed again. No, fellows, I was not getting my kicks. I was feeling stubble, that's what I was doing. Not at all discernible to the naked eye, but stubble nevertheless.

I sat back, staring, thinking. The guy wasn't bald after all. He wasn't even partly bald. The stubble covered the

full range of a normal hair line. Then I leaned forward and opened his mouth, parting his lips from his teeth. His front teeth were even and straight.

I growled at myself. Jebediah Oregon, according to the report I had studied, had a head of thick blond hair and prominent front teeth. He was also fairly tall at five feet eleven, weighing 170 pounds and inclined to plumpness. And he had blue eyes.

Oscar W. Junior was smaller than those specifications and had no dental hang-ups. And he was thin. I opened his shirt to examine his chest hair for color. He was clean-shaven there, too. I gritted my teeth and opened his trousers. Well, even a doctor has to do unpleasant things, and am I any more important than a doctor?

The gay one was hairless all over. From what I could tell he'd had an electrolysis job done on himself. There was no evidence at all as to whether he was blond, brunette, redhead or whatever.

I was going through his pockets when I found something else. A wedding band, of all things! It was wide and bright gold, a very distinctive ring. I tried it on his left hand on the third finger. It fitted perfectly, moving into a natural groove I saw in the flesh.

I put the ring back in the pocket wearily.

"Jebediah Oregon, wherever you are, you've got me beat to a frazzle," I said aloud. "I might as well contact Griffin and tell him to replace me on this assignment. I just ain't no good at all nohow."

I took a short snift of my Scotch, made a wry face as I swallowed it neat, and covered Oscar W. Junior with a blanket. Then I knocked softly on the door to be let out. Gary Fowler, his face flushed with drink, lust, and general excitement, opened the door a crack.

"How was it?"

"Gorgeous. Let me out, Gary. And lock the door after me, please. Oscar wants to sleep a while."

He did as I asked, looking at me with awe. "Man, you

must have been terrific to knock Oscar out like that. He's usually good for a session of several hours."

"I was just jim-dandy. Listen, do you mind if I leave now? I'm pretty pooped myself. Oscar's quite demanding."

"Go head, dear. I'll have someone give me a lift home. That won't be for several days yet, from the look of things. Try to make it back after you get some rest. After all, you and I haven't begun to swing together yet. I'm looking forward to it."

All I was looking forward to was a good sleep. I had a feeling I'd need all the rest I could get. I had a feeling that things were about to close in on me fast. How did I know? Don't ask me.

It was just that I had that troubled feeling again. All over me, from head to toe, every nerve tingling, every sense jumping. Something was about to explode.

Maybe it was me . . . from raw nerves.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Swing is the name of the game

1. Friday, July 13, High Noon; the Silver Truckee

THEY DIDN'T CLOSE in on me that night nor the next morning. They let me sleep in peace. Not that I wasn't ready for them. My door was double-locked and my gun was under my pillow. Of course, I'd rather have slept with a girl, but my gun was a safer bedmate at that time.

It was the phone that woke me up. I grumbled into it until I recognized Honeydew's voice, and that *really* woke me up.

"I'm mad at you," she purred.

She had no right to purr at me like that. Not when I'd been without a woman so long and was lying naked in bed.

"Don't be mad, honey," I said. "Too many people in the world are mad at each other. Be glad, be glad."

"You've been neglecting me. I'm not used to being neglected."

Thus spaketh the virgin. Now, what kind of virgin spaketh like that? I tried to calm down, to not let my sexual id show through my voice.

"You really ought to find a different type of—er—male to appease you," I said. "You know I've got a problem."

"Problems like yours intrigue me. Maybe I'm the kind of girl that thinks she's the kind to make you change your evil ways."

"Not a chance," I said, lying through my teeth. "I like my evil ways." The latter was no lie, but we weren't discussing the same type of evil.

"Well, let's say we have to work at patching up my ego, the one you bruised by neglecting me. Suppose you take me to brunch."

"Solid. And groovy. Or whatever the expression is these days. Give me a half-hour to shave, shower and dress and I'll meet you at the Sky High Room."

"It's a deal, lover."

I mused over this as I went through the business of preparing my body for the day. That gal sounded like no virgin to me. She made all the proper noises of a hot-blooded chick who knew what it was all about, and wanted to sample more.

Was Tally-Ho a liar? And if so, why so? And if she wasn't a liar, what was Honeydew's scam? And if either or both was so, what kind of a situation was I getting into when I should be chasing over hill and dale for Jebediah Oregon?

Maybe I was too old for this job.

Or too young.

2. Friday, July 13, 12:45 p.m.; The Sky High Room

The Sky High Room is one of the eating places of the Silver Truckee. From where Honeydew and I were sitting, we had a tremendous view of Lake Tahoe and the High Sierras beyond. Mount Tallac, with its cross of perpetual snow, loomed to the west like a beacon.

I had another view, one Honeydew did not have. A view of Honeydew. And it was enough to whet all my appetites. She looked as pert and as fresh as a . . . fresh daisy.

Because that's what she was wearing on her bosom, tucked right into that deep and mysterious area between her breasts. A daisy. Except that this wasn't a fresh one.

Not that it was stale; it just wasn't real. It was a gold ornament.

"Interesting," I said, indicating the gold daisy.

"Oh, this little thing? It's a gift from someone."

I perked up my ears. Lucky me, here I was on the trail once more. "A gift from whom, pray?" I tried to be as light about it as possible.

"The stage manager gave it to me on opening night. It's a good-luck piece, he told me."

"Stage manager? Could his name be Rufe Sawyer?"

"That's the one. Do you know him?"

"I've met him."

Rufe Sawyer, of course, was the guy I'd met at the homo party the night before. Gay as gay could be. And part of the daisy chain. But what could the gold daisy mean? It could mean nothing if this was all a goofy coincidence. But it could mean plenty if it was part of a scheme to dazzle me no end. It could also mean more than that if I could figure out what the hell was going on.

Honeydew was gazing at me with those deep pools that were here eyes. When she saw me look at her, she smiled, and that was even more of a razzle-dazzle. It is not my custom to hold beautiful women off at arm's length. Rather is it my way to draw them to me, as fast and as close as possible.

But what could I do? I was hoist by the petard of the Secret Service.

"I'm surprised you admire this little thing," she said.

"Look, I think it's decorative, but that's all. I was just making talk. What else is a guy like me supposed to talk about to a girl?"

"The homo bit, eh?"

"It's not a bit, Honeydew. It's for real." I had to say it harshly in order to get her off my back. This one was too much to keep fighting off. As a matter of fact, right there in the public dining room, I was on the verge of leaping at her across the table. All that loveliness, all that

bosom, daisy or no daisy, all that temptation, that femininity . . .

"Enough!" I said aloud, completing my thought.

Honeydew was startled. "Enough what, dear?"

"Enough of this and don't call me 'dear.' Some of my boyfriends will hear you, and they can get pretty jealous. Look, how about going for a swim in the pool?"

I was no fool. If I couldn't have her I could at least look at her. And the thought of Honeydew in a swim suit (a bikini, naturally) was enough to make me weak in [illegible]

But she begged off. "Sorry. I never go swiming. The sun is bad for my skin. I've got delicate skin, you know."

Oh, I knew! I knew! Smooth as silk, transluscent, ivory in color, it was skin to behold, skin to fondle, skin to kiss! But not for me, alas and alack! Not for Buzz Cardigan, pretender to the throne of queen of the faggots!

But while I was inwardly drooling over her, part of my mind was busy trying to put some pieces of fact together. Rufe Sawyer, eh? Bearer of gifts to girl singers. Gifts of golden daisies. Also guest at homo parties. God's gift to lonely males. Connecting link in the daisy chain between me and Jebediah Oregon?

Hmmmmm. Just conjecture, that was all.

But Honeydew was leaning toward me, putting her hand on mine. What a hand! What softness! What warmth! What anguish!

"Thanks for the brunch, dear," she said in that voice that made it sound like "Thanks for the roll in the hay!" "You run along and enjoy the pool. I have to go get more beauty sleep. But I'm not giving up on you, Buzz. You're just too, too much."

Look who was talking. We would have made all kinds of sweet music together, we two. But right now all the music was in my head and it was a dirge for what might have been.

I watched her ankle off, watched all that svelteness,

all that virility, and sighed hopelessly. Why the hell don't I pick some other line of work, one where I could be me and not something else? Because I'm a nut, that's why. A nut on freedom . . .

Well! Enough philosophizing. To the pool, men!

3. Friday, July 13, 3:00 p.m.; the High Sierras

I never made it to the pool. I was waylaid by Gary Fowler, less than three sheets to the wind, saying he wanted to go fishing the Carson River and would I go along. Would I! There are a few things in this world I really enjoy thoroughly, and fishing is all of them. Pleasurable all the way, even when you don't catch anything. And, unlike some of the other things I enjoy—sex, food, and drink—fishing is guaranteed to be healthy! The others can hurt. And do!

So we broke out our tackle. I took my Fenwick fly rod and my reel, along with some flies that were guaranteed to catch trout of no less than ten pounds each. By three o'clock we had driven into the wilderness of Carson Pass. There were the huge mountains of stone, the forbidding area traveled by the '49ers.

Great history had been created here. But now here we were, two products of the Twentieth Century, scroungers both, living off the weaknesses of our fellow man.

Do you realize that if eveyone was honest and decent, guys like me would be out of work?

"Hey!" Gary shouted as we made a turn along the rushing river. "That's a good spot."

It looked ideal. There were huge boulders forming a small valley beside the river. And there was a pool in the river created by a narrow gulley trapping the water. It looked like a natural abode for the biggest lunkers since Moby Dick.

I parked the car off the road, and Gary and I put on our waders. Gary was an odd one. He was no longer

the queer on the alert for conquest. Now that we were out in the open air, now that we were concentrating on nothing but the challenge of man against nature, he was very much the man. And he looked a lot healthier.

When we were ready he said, "You take this pool, Buzz. I'm going on up ahead. I hate to fish where it's too crowded."

That suited me fine. I'm a loner, too, when it comes to fishing. All I could hear was the rush of the waters, and all I could see was the tranquil pool—and the fish I imagined were lying in wait for my Royal Coachman.

I was the compleat fisherman, the master of finesse, as I stole up to that pool. Everything else was forgotten, every spy, every queer, every assignment. Hell, I even forgot Honeydew and Tally-Ho, if you can imagine such a thing! But fishermen have a reputation for being nuts, anyway.

My false casts were perfection, and I finally laid the fly out at the edge of the pool as pretty as you please. There it stayed, high and dry atop the water, a tempting morsel for any trout. Ah, peace! Ah, tranquility! Where are the snows of yesteryear, and who cares?

Mind you, every sense I possessed was directed to that fly and that water and to what would happen next in relation to them. Not to anything else. Not to humanity and its dirty tricks. Not to a hefty slug at the back of my head that bopped me into the pool face first, sputtering and floundering.

No sooner had I landed in the water than I was hefted up and forced onto land. I was treated like a waterlogged puppet. A pair of hands grabbed me and I was forced to do whatever the owner wanted.

I was choking and roaring with anger as I was hurled ahead to land against a boulder. The boulder resented me and hit right back, making me aware of an assortment of stars and planets of which no one knew.

"All right, bastard!" growled a voice. "Talk!"

I blinked my eyes, trying to adjust my blurred vision. I still couldn't see the face, but the voice was familiar. It was that of the guy who's tried to shoot me in the Sunflower Room.

When I was able to see him, I was positive it was the same character. His face was ugly enough, what with a narrow and low forehead, tiny eyes that glared like small bits of black coral, cheek bones of granite, and a chin that could have served as a shovel.

But that nose! Ah, that nose! It was busted, man! And recently. There was a clean white patch of dressing over it, telling all the world that he had run into something hard. Like my fist.

I could have handled him. But I couldn't handle the three guys with him. Like him, they were big and ugly. And tough. Those characters were made for nothing but destroying people. Their huge fists were bunched at the ready and their yard-wide shoulders were braced to charge at me.

To tackle all four would have been suicide. So the only thing left to do was use my brains. And do you know what I came up with? It was really brilliant. I said, "What the hell do you guys want?" Clever, eh? Well, what would *you* have done? My beautiful rod and reel were floating wildly downstream, and we must have scared every fish within miles. Besides, where was Gary?

He had put the finger on me, of course. He had brought me up here and left me alone so these gorillas could lambast me.

The head gorilla, whom I shall call Hulk because that's what he looked like and I never did discover his name, took a menacing step toward me as I lay back against the boulder. I was in a half-upright position.

"Did you find him?" asked Hulk.

"Find who?"

Bonk!

The sound you've just heard was that of his hamlike

fist pounding my left cheekbone. The stars and planets came back. I shook my head, stalling for time. I figured the more I stalled, the longer I'd live. Because these guys were going to kill me for sure.

I was trapped by the damned waders I was wearing. They made it impossible for me to move with any degree of speed or dexterity. It would have been hard enough to work on one without the others to worry about. And I was worried, man!

The Hulk leaned toward me and shoved his fist against my nose.

"You want this broken the way you broke mine? Talk, Cardigan!"

Remember you're a fairy, Cardigan. Remember the character you've assumed. Act accordingly. I did. I acted like a dumb queer.

"Just ask me whatever you want to know. Did I find whom?"

One of the other blokes giggled gutturally. "Don't he talk fancy, though?"

But the Hulk was still very close and very dangerous.

"Oregon, he growled. "Did you find Jebediah Oregon?"

"I'm looking for him, yes. He's an old boyfriend of mine."

"Boyfriend!" The other jerk almost choked with derisive laughter. "Girlie's got a boyfriend! Now ain't that [redacted] hell!"

"You didn't locate him, eh?" asked the Hulk.

I shook my head. The ape had begun to relax a bit. Or at least he had taken his fist away from the point of my nose. There was also a certain amount of belief in me in his beady eyes.

"Your boyfriend, eh?" he asked. And the other idiot almost fell apart. "That's why ya came up here to look for him?"

"That's it."

"You used to belong to the Secret Service, didn't ya?"

"That's right. But I got busted because they don't want people like me in the Government."

"Why don'tcha say it out, queenie?" yapped his buddy. "Why don'tcha say you're a lousy fag?"

I paid no attention to him. The Hulk was the one I was worried about. If I could have gotten my hand inside my waders to the gun in my pocket, I could have knocked them all off without any trouble. But if I made one move, something told me I'd be minus one nose. And one nose is all I've got.

"All right," said the Hulk. "I'll buy that. But I want you to do something, Cardigan. I want you to get the hell away from Lake Tahoe—as far the hell away as you can. Understand?"

"I understand what you're saying."

"I don't think you do understand. I think I've got to make you understand even more."

Then it came. A piledriver to the pit of mystomach. I went "Whooosh!" and doubled over. That was when he drove one into my right kidney. That smarted! While I was still doubled up, he uppercutted me. Hulk knew his stuff. Whoever hired him for this job knew what he was buying.

I mean that last punch jolted my teeth, my jaw, my head, and my eyes. Not to mention what it did to my thinking facilities. I was in a state of numbed shock all over.

But above it all I could hear the sadistic scream of his buddy: "Hit her! Oh, hit the sweet doll! Let her have it right in that beautiful face! Hit her hard! Harder!"

Boy, did *he* have a problem!

But I had my own. The ground came up and smacked me right in my already battered face. But I couldn't feel a thing. There is a certain state of numbness that envelops your body when you're hit that hard. The dam-

age is done but you don't feel anything. The pain comes later, when your senses are restored.

I do know, however, that the Hulk was kicking my side as I lay there. Nice fellow, this one. Delicate. And thorough. A pro all the way. I could feel my body bouncing with each kick.

When he decided I had enough, he bent over and snarled, "That's it, buddy. You've got to understand by now. If I still see you around Lake Tahoe, I won't go so easy on you."

Just before I passed out, I heard the other one say, "Listen, I ain't queer, see? I like broads. But if I do turn, that doll's gonna be the first. He's just too pretty for words."

4. Friday, July 13, 6:05 p.m.; Beddy-By

I came to in my own bed in my room at the Silver Truckee. The first object I saw was Gary Fowler, and the first thing I wanted to do was wring his neck. But he grabbed my wrists and held me down. Tears were in his eyes, and his lower lip was trembling.

"Take it easy, dear!" he whined. "What are you doing? I'm your friend, remember?"

"Friend, hell! With friends like you, who needs enemies!" I was in a rage, a rage handicapped by the fact that not only was I in bed stark naked, but still weak as hell. There was also an ice-pack on my head, held firmly there by a towel wrapped down to beneath my jaw. And when I moved, my side roared with pain.

"But I'm not an enemy, Buzz. Let me tell you what happened."

I lay back, breathing heavily with sudden exhaustion. "I'll tell you what happened. You enticed me to that spot so hoods could jump me and beat me."

"Not at *all*. I was fishing by myself when some per-

fectly *awful* man came up to me and pulled out a gun! Buzz, it's awful when a *gun* is aimed right at you! I almost passed out from sheer fright! Anyway, he said I had to stay put because some buddies of his were going to talk to you and they didn't want to be disturbed."

He patted his forehead in anguish. "What could I do? I knew you were in trouble, but how could I help you? Gee, Buzz, I'm no hero. That fellow would have *killed* me!"

"Yeah," I growled.

What difference did it make if he was lying or not? If he was telling the truth, that was that. If he was lying, then he was too well-trained to break down and tell the truth. I had to accept what he was telling me.

"What did they want from you, Buzz?"

I turned my face away, pretending anguish. It wasn't hard to pretend, either. "I came up here to look for someone, Gary. It's an old boyfriend of mine, a fellow named Jebediah Oregon."

"My goodness! What a queer name!"

"And a nice queer guy, too. Except that he ran away from me. Those fellows want me to go away from here and stop looking for him."

"But why?"

"How should I know? Maybe one of them is in love with Lulu, too."

"Lulu?"

"That's the fairy name Oregon goes by."

"What are you going to do, Buzz?"

I shrugged. "What choice do I have?"

Gary got to his feet. He had been sitting in a chair at my bedside. "You poor dear. What with one thing and another and all sorts of harassment, we don't have it very easy, do we? Listen, as long as you're awake, suppose I send down for some food."

"I'm not hungry, thanks. Gary, did you bring me home?"

"Of course. And it wasn't easy. I had to tell them downstairs that you were drunk and they let us go up the freight elevator. Buzz, you had a gun in your pocket!"

"Always carry one when I go into the mountains. On account of rattlesnakes, you know."

"Oh, Well, I put it in your dresser drawer. May I say something before I leave?

"Sure."

Gary was almost blushing. "I . . . er . . . I had to undress you, you know."

"I gathered that by myself."

He walked slowly to the door. "I just want to tell you one thing. You're the handsomest man I've ever seen . . ." He had the door open "*. . . all over!*"

And he was gone.

Maybe it would have been better if those tough guys had knocked me off. How much of this could I take?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jiggle it a little, it'll work

1. Friday, July 13, 6:00 p.m.; My Shower, Bless It!

Alone and comparatively safe, I got out of bed and made sure my door was double-locked. I don't know which I feared most, the Hulk or Gary Fowler. Then I had the task of examining the damages to my body. Boy, was I ever black and blue!

The Hulk's boots were made for stomping, and they had stomped all over me. My flesh and my sides were sore, but no ribs were broken, luckily. But I was nevertheless one big ache. The back of my head was lumpy, but there was no break in the skin and, outside of a heavy thumping and banging every time I took a breath, there was no aftereffect. Oh yes, I also had a bellyache from the blow to my stomach.

The Hulk was no man to run into when you were defenseless, that was for sure.

I considered myself lucky all around. The Hulk did not want to kill. Not yet. But he had given me a warning about the next time we met. I had a feeling he meant what he said. But I'm a Secret Service agent, I reminded myself. And Secret Service agents don't run away from threats, damn it. Something about rules and regulations.

That's the trouble with our system. Too much red tape.

Confused, I decided to take a shower. I always do my best thinking while taking a shower. I was also dirty. Fishing and getting beaten up can get pretty messy.

With that good water pouring down on me and with the lather working furiously, I was able to lose myself, forget the outside world, and do some summing up of whatever I had so far.

It wasn't much. It was obvious that the Enemy had not yet caught up with Jebediah Oregon. That's why they had sent the Hulk after me, to see if he could beat out of me whether or not I had located the self-exiled scientist. But if the Hulk was here, trying to find Jebediah, then Jebediah had to be here.

The Enemy didn't want me killed, either. That would have been too messy. It would have meant a murder for the police to investigate and a body to dispose of. And the Enemy didn't know if I was worth it. So far, my only identity was that of an ex-agent booted out of the service for being a homosexual.

I had admitted looking for Jebediah Oregon, but only as a rejected lover looking for his soul mate. So the immediate heat was off me. For the moment. But the Hulk wasn't going to fool around too long with me. It was obvious that I had to move fast. I had to get to Jebediah, wherever he was.

Having come to that brilliant conclusion, I got out of the shower, shaved, and dressed.

And I walked out the door. I knew that I would either come back to that room with Jebediah Oregon or I would not come back at all. After all, dead men don't return to their hotel rooms.

2. *Friday, July 13, 7:00 p.m.; Reno, Sparks, and Other Points*

It was while I was going down the elevator that I had the bright thought that brought everything to a head.

I didn't know it was a bright thought at the time; I never do. But if I have an idea, I follow it through in the hopes that it will work. I get that from my old man.

He was one of the greatest mechanics and fixers in the world. It didn't matter what it was, whether it was a broken watch or a stuck fishing reel or an over-wound clock, he had one surefire method of fixing it.

He'd say, "Jiggle it a little, it'll work."

And, by God, it worked! He'd just shake whatever was broken or stuck, and it would function again. Of course there were some things you couldn't jiggle. Like radios and television sets. We clobbered those with sharp kicks. But that's how my old man fixed things, and he taught me.

So what I had to do now was put everything together and jiggle it a little and it'd work. Right?

The first jiggle was that Jebediah Oregon could have left Lake Tahoe and gone down to Reno. Why not? Reno is only fifty miles from the lake, and people are going back and forth all the time. That's how they change their luck, they hope, and how they get to see different shows.

Following this thought, I got my car and drove down beautiful Clear Creek Grade which comes down the High Sierras into Carson Valley. There I hit Route 395, turned north toward Carson City and Reno. It's a beautiful and exciting drive, the mountains at one side, the valley and Gold Hill, home of Virginia City, on the other.

I would have enjoyed it except for one bit of trivia. I was just coming out of the Bowers Mansion area when I noticed I was being followed. It was a big black Caddy, and it kept up a pace exactly like mine while staying far back. That was the first thing I noticed, the even pace. I tested the Caddy. I speeded up, it speeded up. I slowed, it slowed.

Wheeee! I thought. *We're off and running!*

I peered closely into my rear-view mirror and my side mirror. Yep, there he was. The Hulk. This time he was wearing a pair of sunglasses, evidently meant as some

sort of disguise. I'd never put the Hulk on my brainy list. Brawn, yes, but not brain. And his buddies were with him.

I kept the car at a seventy-mile an hour clip. There are, you see, no speed laws in Nevada. At least, not out on the open road. You are supposed to drive at what can be considered a reasonable speed warranted by traffic conditions.

The Hulk's car kept pace at seventy an hour.

I slowed down on entering Reno. So did the Hulk. Egad, I would have loved to stop and see some of the shows in that lovely town that's called The Biggest Little City In The World. But if I did—and I ran into Jebediah—the Hulk would take over my prize. This I did not want, you can be sure.

I was about to give the whole thing up as a bad job and was making the turn that would have headed me south on 395 back toward Carson City and the lake when I saw it.

Another car. A late-model Pontiac of pale blue. Nothing remarkable to that, you say? Ah, but at the wheel was Oscar W. Junior. And something else. Sitting as he was, the light hitting his profile as it did, I saw the flash of Jebediah Oregon. No, I was not positive. And maybe I was seeing things because of the strain I'd been under. But at that moment, he did look something like the photo I had seen of the escaped scientist.

Nutty, eh? A hell of a lot of nothing to go on, eh? Just a flash of goofy instinct, a mirage set up by hope and despair and by the fear of the Hulk hot on my trail.

But there it was and I was stuck with it.

Oscar was heading north on Virginia Avenue through Reno. I swung right after him. The Hulk swung after *me*. So here we were, following one another. The question was: who was doing what to whom? And why? But we of the Secret Service do not reason why; ours but to do and . . . *die?*

Don't think that way, Cardigan. It's negative, and you must think positive.

Oscar, with a mind of his own, turned right on Route 80. That would bring him—and me, and the Hulk—into Sparks. When I saw Oscar turn into the driveway of a motel just before Sparks, I kept on going. So did the Hulk.

I knew two things. I had business with Oscar W. Junior. You see, a few jiggles were now beginning to work out. But I had to see him alone. The Hulk and his men were in the way. I had to get them out of the way. It would take a bit of doing—a bit of very rough doing, in fact. But Hulk was a rough guy.

Hang on to your hats, boys!

Just past the quaint little town of Sparks, once a railroad headquarters, now a booming casino town, is the turnoff to Pyramid Lake. I took that turn. Once I was out of the city limits, the speed of my car went up as high as I could take it. That is to say, about a hundred and ten miles an hour.

Lo and behold, there was the Caddy behind me. At exactly one hundred and ten miles an hour. What do you know! I grinned to myself. I would be making a very false statement if I denied it was a grin of evil.

You see, I, Buzz Cardigan, the Man From Pansy, as some wit in the Department named me, the limp-wristed spy who stops at nothing to queer freedom's enemies, was about to become an executioner.

The Hulk and his henchmen were about to die. It was either him or me. But better him than me, *n'est-ce pas?*

When you go toward Pyramid Lake you go through what I like to call the Valley of the Moon. The moon has to look like this, gray and desolate and mysterious with nature's lost wonder. There are sand dunes and pale mountains and desert and sparse growths. Miles and miles of it, endless in its loneliness.

When I'd been here before I'd found peace in its

empty splendor. This was the beginning and the end of all time. This was the world still untouched by the hand and evil of man. There was just the road, a ribbon of macadam cutting the earth.

But I was not enjoying my drive on that Friday the 13th.

I was bent over the wheel, fighting to keep the car steady knowing that the Hulk was behind me and knowing that he knew I knew it. There was no mistaking anything now. The hunter was being hunted down. When and if they caught me, everything was over for me. At least, that's what the Hulk thought, I'm sure. I had other plans.

You pass mile after mile on Route 33. And it seems that when you pass the next bend, there is the edge of the earth. But it's not so. Because when you pass the next bend, there is Pyramid Lake.

A jewel in the wilderness. A true oasis in the desert mountains. Discovered and named by Fremont, the intrepid explorer and busybody. Water of emerald green and sapphire blue, streaked with the gold of its mountains and the glow of its sunrises and sunsets.

Pyramid Lake is Indian property, being set right in the center of an Indian reservation. There are a couple of small groupings of cabins for rent, a boating dock, a small store, and that is all. The rest is wilderness. And peace.

But not on Friday the 13th!

I made the one last turn, passed a rise of earth, and there was Lake Pyramid. I glanced into my rear-view mirror and there was the Caddy. I took the main road going down toward the lake, going lickety-split just like Eddie Polo in the old movie serials my old man used to tell me about.

There is a road that turns right sharply to go back along the shore of the lake. I banked hard and took that. So did the Caddy. Only this time the Hulk decided not

to keep following me. Hell, he was going to catch up with me! And Heaven only knew what after that! I wasn't going to wait to find out.

I gave the Ford all it had. Bless Henry! He and I and the car held our own as we tore along that road. I was counting on another road up ahead. It turned left directly toward the lake. At the end of the road was an abandoned stone structure. You couldn't seet it as you drove toward the structure, but the road ended sharply and abruptly right behind it.

And beyond *that?* Nothing. Only the lake.

I swung sharp left on the road. My wheels spun sand and gravel and lizards all over the place. I veered hither and yon for about a hundred yards but then set myself right again, and I was on my way.

But the Caddy held the road better than I. It made the turn, and then it gained yardage on me as we headed toward the lake. I had the accelerator on the floor and my heart in my mouth. Don't ask me where my stomach was. I'd forgotten that long ago.

My old man was the one who taught me how to drive. "When you're in trouble, son," he said, "hang on and pray."

And that's what I did. Except that just when I figured I'd go shooting past the stone structure I swung the wheel to the left and stepped on the brake. Still hanging on, still praying.

I screeched to a stop. But not the Caddy. I spun around just in time to see the car go by, still on the road, still hitting it at over a hundred miles an hour. I also caught the flash of faces of the Hulk and his cohorts. They were, to say the least, frozen in surprise.

The next instant they were plummeting off the edge of the road and over into the crystal-clear waters of Pyramid Lake. But while the Caddy was still in the air and on its way down into the lake, it came apart. I mean it was the Fourth of July all over the place. Bits of car

and pieces of the Hulk & Company scattered to the seven winds and to the seven seas, for all I know. The sections, large and small, fell into the water, gurgled a little bit, and then all was as it had been for millions of years.

Except for me. After that near miss, I'll never be the same. It almost killed off all thoughts of sex. Almost. And that only for as long as it took to get back onto the main road and charge back to Sparks.

Well, what else are you going to think about when you're hitting it on a deserted road and you've got nothing else on your mind for almost an hour? I say if you can't have sex at the moment, think sex. Think women. Think Honeydew and Tally-Ho and all such beautiful thoughts.

Above all, don't think of the guys you left behind.

"Oh! that way madness lies; let me shun that," said Shakespeare. That was one guy who knew his stuff. I'll drink to that. Satchel Paige said it another way: "Don't look behind you; somebody may be following." That makes sense, too.

I got back to Sparks without wrecking the car. And the light-blue Pontiac was still in the motel area, parked before Number Six. I got out of my car, walked up to Number Six, took a deep breath, and knocked.

It took a few knocks before I got any response. And then a woman answered the door. I gaped for an instant. A woman was one sex I did not expect to see in Number Six. And when I say woman, that's exactly what I mean. Let's not split hairs about this. She was beautiful. She was something out of an old Charles Dana Gibson drawing, full-blown, perfectly featured with an aquiline nose, a full mouth, big, blue eyes, clean jawline and tiny chin, unreal cheeks, and hair that was part honey, part zephyr and part cobweb.

She was tall, with an hourglass figure composed of a bosom that was made for loving and nursing, a thin waist, full hips and long legs. She was dressed in a rather de-

crepit housecoat of some kind. Her feet were bare. She also wore a marriage ring.

There were two things wrong with her. One, she looked very, very sad, as though she'd been crying. And she had a voice like the rubbing of sandpaper, very rough stock, against coarse cement.

"Yeah?" she grated. "Whaddaya want?"

"Who, me?" I gaped. "Why . . . nothing. I must have the wrong place. Excuse, please."

She gave me a fast up-and-down survey. She obviously didn't like what she saw because that lovely mouth turned into a sneer.

"You ain't the guy with the liquor, are you?" she asked.

"Sorry."

"Then beat it!" And the door was slammed in my face.

Shuddering at whatever it was that caused such great beauty to become so blighted, I went back to my car. I had left it parked up the street at the curb. I got in and waited.

Three cigarettes later Oscar W. Junior and blue Pontiac came out of the driveway. I sighed wearily, made sure my gun was still tucked into my belt, and started up my car.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The spy who came in from the queer

1. Friday, July 13, 9:30 p.m.; the Dine-In Diner

It took me one spurt of gas to catch up with him. I honked my horn and he turned and looked at me. He turned instant-pale and almost pulled off the road.

"Take it easy, Oscar!" I yelled to him. "Pull into that diner parking lot up ahead. I want to talk to you."

He was a wreck. He did as I asked, but came close to scraping the fenders of a couple of cars in the parking lot. The Dine-In Diner was a scrubby place that was antiquated in 1930. It seemed the right place, however, to have a sub rosa meeting with Oscar W. Junior.

He walked side by side with me without a word, his head down, his eyes on his toes. The dandy was gone, replaced by a man who'd been caught with his pants down. Not that Oscar would have minded that under almost any other circumstances. But being caught in a cabin with a married woman was just not in his image.

I found a booth at the end of the longish room where we could be apart from the others. Oscar slumped in his seat across from me and stared at his folded, perspiring hands. I didn't say a word until the waitress brought coffee.

"Gallivanting, eh, Oscar?" I asked.

He looked up at me. His eyes were bleak.

"You caught me! You were the one at the door."

"That's right. I saw you go in the motel a couple of hours ago. For shame, Oscar. You're not living up to what you claim you are."

"Buzz! Please! You won't give me away, will you?"

"But you've pictured yourself as queen of the May, Oscar. You swing with all the gay boys, making it as the biggest pansy of them all. And here you are shacking up with a—ugh!—*woman!* What's the idea, Oscar? What would your namesake say?"

"He was married, too."

"*He was married, too?* Ah—hold it a second, Oscar. Are you telling me that woman is your *wife?*"

He nodded. And with that nod a whole batch of theories went out the window, down the drain, up in smoke or whatever.

You see, I had Oscar W. Junior pretty well tabbed as Jebediah Oregon. His head had been shaved, his teeth had been fixed, he had lost weight, and I also noticed he affected flat-heeled shoes. All this could easily change his appearance. His eyes? Jebediah had blue eyes and Oscar had brown. But I also spotted the fact that Oscar was wearing contacts. And they could be brown.

But Oscar was married and Jebediah was not.

Another good guess gone wrong. Griffin, where is the basis of your confidence in me and in my luck as a bloodhound? I'm anemic, boss-man.

I took a sip of my coffee. It was lousy.

"Oscar," I said at last, wishing the java was hemlock, "what's this wife bit with you?"

His eyes lit up. Yep, they held contacts, all right. But how was I going to prove they were different in color? Poke his eyes out, for Pete's sake?

"I'd love to tell you about it, Buzz," Oscar said. "But you won't let on to the others, will you?"

"Why should I? Listen, I saw you go in that place. I had a few things to do in town, and when I came back

and saw your car still parked outside, I thought I'd invite you to have a drink or something. Hell, I didn't intend to snoop."

Now Oscar managed a smile. His strength was coming back.

"I'm all broken up because you found out about me, Buzz. But as long as it's you and not one of the old ladies of the Daisy Club, I'm not worried any more. I trust you, Buzz. You're a doll. I knew that the minute I saw you."

He sighed deeply and stirred his coffee. "It's like this, Buzz. I've been married for almost five years, but I didn't discover I was gay until right after my wedding. Mrs. Junior is a great gal, you know."

"I didn't know."

"Well, she is. I told her the truth, but she said she loved me and wanted to stick by me. She agreed to an arrangement whereby I could pursue my homosexual proclivities. My aberration, Buzz, is the big tragedy of my life and hers, but there's nothing I can do about it. I just can't resist fellows, and I can't resist acting the grand queen."

"Pretty rough, eh?"

"Oh, Buzz, you have no idea. That woman has such patience! Whenever I go off on one of these gay toots, she stands by patiently and waits for it to be over. Then we go back to ordinary living—until the next time."

"But what is she doing here now, Oscar?"

"She missed me, she said, and wanted to be with me for a while. She said she won't interfere with my other—er—activities."

"Very understanding. But she was crying, I noticed."

Oscar was suddenly ill at ease. His story had been going over very well, but this was a sensitive area that I had struck. He squirmed and avoided my eyes.

"Part of the tragedy, Buzz," he said at last. "You see, Mrs. Junior drinks. Quite a lot, I might add. She was

upset because I wouldn't allow her to stock up on whiskey. God, I hate to see her drunk, Buzz. I don't care what she does when she's alone, but I hate the sight of a drunken woman. Don't you?"

Play your role, Buzz! This is your cue. "I hate the sight of *any* woman, Oscar."

Oscar actually simpered. "Oh, I *know*, Buzz! I *know!* You were just *wonderful* in bed with me. It was a *most* gratifying experience."

I tried not to gape at him. I also tried not to batter his silly face in. Hell, we'd never gone to bed together. I'd made sure of that by making him pass out. Then what in hell was he talking about?

I could draw only one conclusion: the guy had dreamed it actually happened and believed it was true. A queer with his problem—being married and all—had to have more than the usual mental hang-ups.

"We must do it again real soon," Oscar said, lowering his head modestly.

"Sure," I agreed. "And exactly the same way."

His coffee was cold, but he drained it off thirstily. I had lost my appetite for anything. Damn! I'd wasted time on a wild goose chase while whatever was happening was going on back at Lake Tahoe.

"Sorry I busted in on your private life," I said. "Just for that, I'll pick up the tab for this coffee."

"Oh, *you!*" Oscar slapped the back of my hand with his fingertips. "Aren't you the *one*, though. Listen, dearie, if that's all, I want to get back to Lake Tahoe. I've got a big date later tonight."

"Sure. I've got to get back, too."

When we got to the cars, he drew very close to me in the darkness. "Well, ta-ta, Buzz. Be bad."

"Yeah. You too."

I knew he wanted to embrace me, but he managed to

control himself. Instead, he sighed deeply and gave me a "some other time" look. Then he took off in his car.

When he was gone I got into my crate and started to pull out. The front of my car was just edging onto the pavement when a pair of glaring headlights came right at me from down the road. I braked heavily, and the other car swerved drunkenly to avoid hitting me. And when I say drunkenly, that's just what I mean.

The driver was loaded. Not only that, the driver was Mrs. Oscar W. Junior and she was heading in the direction of Lake Tahoe. "Whew!" I said to myself. "What a world!"

But it wasn't my world. I was still looking for the world of Jebediah Oregon, and this wasn't it. One thing worried me, however: had I been decoyed into coming to Reno and Sparks while the real stuff was going on up at the lake?

I stepped on the gas. My hands were tight on the wheel. So I wasn't free and easy. So I was tense. I had gotten rid of a few of the cohorts of the Enemy. But the Enemy could still be at the lake, still hot on the trail of Jebediah Oregon . . . while I was busy snooping after a poor character who wouldn't know what straight was if he had a ruler to guide himself!

2. Friday, July 13, 10:50 p.m.; the Silver Truckee

Traffic was jammed along Route 50 as I came into the Lake Tahoe area. This was Friday night, the start of the big weekend. Would-be winners were coming in from San Francisco, Sacramento, and points in between and all around. Cars were crawling along bumper to bumper, the occupants charged with hope and greed.

The route would be reversed by Sunday night. The cars would be headed home, the passengers with gloom and emptiness in their faces. They'd be cleaned out. But

come next Friday and they would be on their way back with fresh money and fresh hope.

The casino was packed, of course. The slots were devouring coins as fast as the customers could feed them. The dice were clicking away, and with each click laughing at those trying to defeat the odds.

There was an air of carnival about the whole place. It was still early in the weekend.

My first stop was one of the bars of the casino. I needed a drink after that evening's waste. Also, the thought of the Hulk and his men and what had happened to them didn't sit too well with me. I was glad it was them and not me scattered all over the landscape, of course, but the scene had not been pleasant.

And there at the bar were Honeydew and Gary. Their heads were huddled close together, but there was a tension in their bodies that told me that all was not peaches and cream between them. When I joined them, Honeydew drew away from Gary. Her face was drawn and her eyes were blazing.

"Lover's spat?" I asked as I took a stool.

"What?" snarled Honeydew, looking and sounding nothing at all like any kind of honey. "With this creep? Excuse me, Gary. I've got to rest up for the midnight show."

She barely looked at Gary as she left. Gary was in a wry sulk as he ordered another drink and asked me what I was having. I ordered straight Scotch and wondered what had hit the two of them. Gary guessed my curiosity.

"The little bitch is fussing over the lights," he said. "Hell, I'm only the stage manager. But I'll talk to the lighting man. Those damned singers put up squawks about anything. Whew! Broads!"

"I didn't think you two would go for each other.

Listen, Gary, any new members of our special set come in that you know of?"

Gary leaned close. "You mean more gay boys? No, Buzz. You've seen all there is to see. Gambling places have never been popular for us queens, Buzz. Everybody's too interested in busting the games to be excited over far-out sex. Looks like the dice absorb all the energy people have. Nope; the gay set is small and exclusive here. Why do you ask?"

"I'm looking for someone."

"Oh." He took a deep sip of his drink. "Good luck. Meanwhile, if you want to kill time pleasantly while you wait, I'm available."

He let one leg swing free and rubbed it against mine.

"Where have you been, lover boy?" he asked.

"Oh, just driving around. Took in some of the sights."

"Enjoy yourself?"

"I had a fair time."

"Do you know how you strike me, Buzz? You're not the type that has just a fair time, not ever. I figure you attract excitement wherever you go."

"It's been known to happen."

I made small talk, but something disturbed me. It was Honeydew. Her anger had been deep and dangerous, something I had never suspected was within her. And Gary was also a bit paler than usual. He was a stage manager, tough and hard-bitten through years of experience in such matters. The temperament of a singer would not get under his hide like this.

But so what? I could make nothing of that bit of observation. It was only something to file and forget, one more bit of intelligence that made no sense at all.

Gary excused himself, saying he had to get back to the show. I was left alone with still another thought chugging through my lame brain. What were Honeydew

and Gary doing away from the show at that hour? The show ended after eleven o'clock, and here they were, having a drink and spatting about some miserable light arrangements.

The whole thing smelled. But it had the stink of skunk. You could smell it, all right, but you couldn't track the stench to its source. You only knew it was there and bothering the living hell out of you.

It was then that I spotted Oscar W. Junior. He was flitting about the casino ten feet off the ground. He had shucked his depressed state and was his own gay self again, leaving a wake of queer a mile wide as he flounced about the big room.

He saw me and floated over.

"Buzz, darling," he whisperered, leaning into me. "You have no idea of how happy I am away from that woman. I'm free! Free as a bird, I tell you! Listen, darling . . ."

He leaned even closer. "How about you and me . . . in my room or yours . . . right now?"

"Sorry, Oscar."

His hand was on my thigh. It was a very hot hand indeed.

"I've *got* to, I tell you. I've got the hots something *fierce*. If I don't get mine tonight, I'll go out of my stark staring mind."

"I repeat: sorry."

"Listen." He was even closer now and practically in my lap. "I've got to have something tonight. This is the third day."

Every sense I had came alive. "The third day? What does that mean?"

"*Sex*, that's what it means. This will be the third day I'll have been without sex. Oh, I'm not talking about what happened between you and me. That doesn't count. I'm sure it was *delightful* but—and I hate to tell you this,

Buzz darling—I don't remember a thing about it. I was stoned out of my mind."

My mouth was dry. *This will be the third day I'll have been without sex . . . If I don't get mine tonight, I'll go out of my stark, staring mind . . .*

This was Jebediah Oregon! This *had* to be Jebediah Oregon! Jebediah Oregon, too, could not go three days without sex! But what was I dreaming about? Was I reading evidence into things because I was desperate? Hell, neither could I go three days without sex! What kind of evidence was that to hang a man on?

None at all. It was time for me to put in a call in code and tell the Department to take me off the case. There was no Jebediah Oregon around here. Either that, or I wasn't up to tracking him. In any event, I was through at Lake Tahoe.

Jebediah Oregon could already have fallen into the hands of the Enemy, the Hulk to the contrary notwithstanding. They could have brainwashed him and gotten his formula from him and then killed him.

And all I was doing was chasing wild geese and getting mixed up with show-biz spats and fags on the lam and broads who got me all stirred up and with whom I couldn't have anything to do besides look.

"Buzz Cardigan," I said to myself, strict as hell as I always am when I'm disgusted with the character who bears my name, "you're all through, kid. Wash up and go home."

I paid my bar tab and got up to leave.

"Wheeee!" I heard someone say.

That someone was a woman. A very beautiful woman. A woman whom I understood to be Mrs. Oscar W. Junior.

She was gowned in splendor. She was rolling a pair of dice at one of the tables. She was roaring drunk and happy as a skylark trilling in the breeze.

And what was wrong with that picture, you might ask? I'll tell you, mates. This was no distraught woman upset because her husband was queer. This was a woman having one hell of a good time and spending money like she had a money machine.

And there was something else wrong with the picture, too.

Gary came up to her. He was smiling but he was firm. He cashed in her winnings in spite of her protests. Then he took her firmly by the arm and, with that grin frozen on his face, led her to the door.

I followed, far enough behind so as not to be noticeable. Gary asked for his car to be brought up. Without him seeing me, I went around to the parking lot and got my own heap. When I drove up to the area where he and Mrs. Junior had been, he was just pulling out in his car.

Mrs. Junior was slumped beside him; she went along without fighting him. And he still had that broad smile planted on his face.

It wasn't a happy smile.

Maybe my luck hadn't run out after all.

Gary swung left on Route 50. That meant Gary was heading for San Francisco. Or Sacramento. Or the wilderness in between, the miles of vast mountain crags and lost forest, the place where a person could be killed and left behind, never to be found.

I stayed as close as I dared without Gary getting suspicious. We went through the State Inspection Station. Then, instead of staying on Route 50, he turned sharp left.

There is nothing along Luther Pass, not for many, many miles of primitive rawness. Now, what could a fellow be thinking of, taking a beautiful girl into all that? Well, he could be thinking of making love to her.

There is plenty of darkness there, plenty of places where a car could park and a couple could make love wild enough to match the surroundings.

But it is also a place where a man could take a girl he wanted to kill.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Saturday's child works hard for a loving

1. Saturday, July 14, 12:01 a.m.; the Highest Sierra

It was a long trek up Luther Pass. Even now, a hundred years after the pioneers crossed it into Hope Valley, it is still remote and unsettled. There are no homes here, only the rough rawness of mountains, the abandoned loneliness of Grass Lake, the low, sweeping plain of Hope Valley before the road goes into the even more remote isolation along the Carson River.

The car ahead of me kept on at a steady clip. Me, I tried not to appear as though I was following. I pulled back for a while, then sped up a bit. I blacked out my lights for a stretch and was guided only by the brightness of the moon. This, I hoped, made it seem as if I'd turned off and another car had come into the road.

It seemed to work. Gary didn't get panicky but kept right on. I squeezed my arm against my side. Yep, my gun was still tucked in there. Hell, if I ran into real trouble, this guy wasn't going to get the jump on me, rules or no rules.

At the turn where the road crosses the river over a small bridge, the main branch of the road turns left. The part that turns right goes into wilderness barely explored even in the daytime, except by eccentric and reckless fishermen who want to investigate remote trout waters. No one drives there at night.

Except Gary Fowler and his passenger.

I was fairly close behind him when he made the right turn. I turned left instead and went on for a way. Then I turned around, switched off my lights, and followed him. I could see his tail-lights, and they led me with no trouble.

He pulled off the road ahead of me. I stopped quickly so he wouldn't hear my engine. I blessed the river that plunged downhill beside the road. The noise it made prevented him from hearing my footsteps as I ran toward the car.

I stole up to the car. Gary had pulled the woman out, shoving her so that she fell onto the ground. She did not look so happy, being, so to speak, away from her element. Getting behind the car, I yanked out my gun.

The reason? Simple. You see, Gary had a gun out, too. And he was aiming it right at the woman's generous bosom as he stood over her.

"Don't!" pleaded Mrs. Junior. She was a whining and lost wreck.

"Why didn't you stay put, Isabelle?"

"Hell, Gary, I got tired of staying all cooped up in that lousy motel. I gotta get my kicks, too, you know."

"You're not being paid to get kicks. You're being paid to stay at the motel and keep up the front as Mrs. Oscar W. Junior. You weren't supposed to step out of character, honey. You're not supposed to do anything to show you're a fraud."

Well, there we were, weren't we? The whole damn thing was up for grabs. Mrs. Oscar W. Junior was not for real. That meant that neither was Oscar W. Junior. One fraud plus another fraud equals—what? One guess, friends. They equal Mr. Jebediah Oregon!

And now that I knew *that*, where did it leave me? Miles away from Jebediah, out here in no-human's land, stranded with a madman with a gun who was about to commit murder.

Well, first things first, I always say.

I started to go around the car toward where Gary was about to pull a trigger and bring a swift conclusion to the short but slaphappy life of Isabelle.

And he was still talking. Funny how some guys make a big act out of killing. They like to make speeches, it seems. Something like a need to explain what they are about to do to their victims. (We who are about to kill you, salute you!)

"You should have stayed put, baby," he was saying. "We needed that front for our boy so nobody'd catch on as to who he really is. But did you stay put? No. So now I'm going to make sure you'll stay put for good."

The gun was leveled. I kept on coming. I could have dropped him on the spot. But I didn't want that. I wanted him able to talk. I needed a lot more than he'd already revealed.

"Gary," the woman pleaded. "Don't do it, please. Listen—" And lying on the ground, she began to unbutton her shirt. It was a pretty shirt, but what was under it was far prettier. It was also fleshy. And large. And topped by a rose-colored button right in the rising center.

What can I say? I was in such condition I almost stopped to gape. Or applaud. Or say something like, "Don't kill her! Do anything else you want, Gary, but save some for me!"

And it was at that instant that I made too loud a noise coming around the car. Hell, I bumped hard into the fender, that's what I did. The sight of that gorgeous breast in the moonlight threw me. Hell, breasts throw me every time.

Did I tell you I was a great breast man? And a behind man? Well, why fool around? I'm a great woman man. And that's one of my troubles. It almost came to finishing me that night. Because Gary Fowler heard me and spun around, yelling, "Who's that?"

His yell was drowned out by the crack of my .38.

They taught me a lot in the Secret Service training center. One of them was how to fire a .38. I'd learned my lesson well. The shot hit his gun hand and the bloody thing went flying. It waved all over the place, and the gun took off on its own voyage into the darkness.

The gal screamed and, for some strange reason, covered her breast. But who was looking? I was busy grabbing Gary, who was howling his fool head off in pain. He was hopping up and down, clutching his bad hand with his whole one and howling "Hoooooooh!"

I yanked the bad hand and examined it. I kept my gun on him all the while, you can be sure. "Take it easy, Gary," I said. "It looks worse than it is."

"You!" he howled. "You—you son of a bitch!"

"I'm surprised at you, Gary. I just prevented you from committing murder. They execute murderers in this state, you know."

"Don't give me the wise-guy talk. You followed us, right?"

"Well, I wasn't out here following the trail of Kit Carson."

"Still a Government man, eh? That act of yours is a fraud. You're after Jebediah Oregon."

"I never pretended I wasn't after him, Gary."

By this time I had a handkerchief wrapped around his hand. I shoved him into his car, helped the woman to her feet and into the car. Then I told Gary to take the wheel. I sat in back, my gun still out.

"Now listen, Gary," I said, "and listen good. I've got the gun on you. You drive back with one hand. And don't do anything funny. I've got all the funny lines in this story."

"Haw!" Gary scoffed.

"Just drive back to the hotel. When we get there you and I and this little lady are going up to my room. Put your bad hand in your pocket and keep it there. And keep your mouth closed. Because I'm a bad one, Gary.

I've been known to shoot nicer people than you just because I was in the mood. I wasn't kicked out of the service for nothing. I'm a pansy looking for his man, and I figure out you know where that man is. Remember, there's nothing like a faggot scorned. Now get going and behave yourself."

"Phony!" Gary sneered as he started the car up. And he repeated the word all the way back to the Silver Truckee, over and over until I was beginning to believe he was making sense.

2. Saturday, July 14, 1:30 a.m.; the Silver Truckee

With the passing of Friday the 13th, my luck began to improve. I was able to get Gary Fowler and Isabelle into the hotel and my room without any trouble. Gary wasn't about to make a fuss, knowing my gun was ready, and the lady didn't give a damn.

Gary slumped into a chair. He looked like a guy against whom a wrong decision had been passed. I locked the door and faced him. Isabelle also took a seat. She had the face of a dazed doll. Also, she had not bothered to rebutton her blouse. The rise of flesh peeked out from between the opening, and I tell you I had a job concentrating on what I had to do.

But I got to it.

"What's this all about, Gary?" I asked. "Why the plant of a fake wife on Oscar—or Jebediah Oregon?"

But Gary had had a change of heart. He sneered at me.

"Why don't you mind your own business, G-man? Why can't you let people get their kicks the way they want to?"

"I'm no Government man; I'm a muscle man who works on fags. Jebediah was a good target for some loot. I want that loot. I want Jebediah. Now get on the house

phone and call him. If he's not in his room, have him paged."

"Go to hell."

I hit him. Sometimes it's better to take the quickest route in giving a command. Of course, I could have argued with Gary all night or slapped him around a bit. But these things take time, and I didn't have much of it. So, standing right in front of him as he sat down, I brought my knee up and caught him right under the chin.

He made a funny noise which I can't begin to describe. He also fell back, slamming himself against the back of the chair. That made his back sore. His chin wasn't in such good shape, either. I must have shaken and rattled him all the way up and down.

"Son of a bitch," he growled through sore jaws.

"Make the call, Gary."

I handed him the phone. He made the call while glaring at me. "Oregon, get over to Room 460. Have to talk to you." I prodded Gary and he said, "On the double, Oregon."

We settled back to wait. It didn't take too long. There was a gentle tap on my door within a surprisingly few minutes. I'd already warned my guests not to make a sound. Then I moved to the door, got to a position where I could open the door without being seen, and turned the knob. My gun was in my coat pocket and ready for use.

But I wasn't ready for what happened. Sometimes it's Friday the 13th all the time.

First a gun came in. And that gun knew just what it was doing. It edged around the door and aimed itself right at me. There was a hand attached to that gun. And attached to that hand was a bare, smooth arm.

Attached to *that* was Honeydew Demay.

"Hello," I said. Was I nonplussed? You can bet I was.

The expression on Honeydew's face was sheer murder. The beauty, althought still there, was hardened into a mask of mayhem, murder, death . . . you name all the bad things that could happen to you, there they were on that face . . . and aimed at me . . . along with the gun.

"Get inside where I can keep an eye and this gun on you," she snapped. And she wasn't kidding. She glanced in Gary's direction. "Good going, Flower. This is one time you didn't goof."

Flower, eh? Wasn't that cute! And wasn't he cute! It just then occurred to me that he had not rung Jebediah by asking for him by name. He had called a room number instead. He had called Honeydew, of course. And it was she who had come on the double to handle this rather delicate situation.

Gary dipped into my pocket for my gun and shoved me into a chair. So there I was, mates, facing a cute dish who wanted nothing but to kill me. If she'd ever had any desire for me, it was long gone. All she desired was my demise. But I had other plans in mind. First, however, she had to do some talking.

"So you're the mastermind behind all this?" I asked. "Or is it mistressmind?"

She shrugged her delicate shoulders. She was still dressed in an evening gown, and it was a precious thing to see. But it was like the skin of a snake, beautiful outside—but inside, oh my!

"Name it whatever you like." She was smiling, but it wasn't a social smile. "Either one fits me. So you're after Jebediah Oregon, eh? We were both after him, Buzz, your people and mine."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

She shrugged off that weak attempt of mine. "The point is that we've got him. You're too late, Buzz. But we can use you."

"I'm not for hire, Honeydew."

I was looking around for something I could grab and throw at her. There was nothing within reach. She would have dropped me in a second if I made a move that failed. Besides, there was Gary, standing there with my gun in his hand. He didn't look as adept with it as Honeydew did, but a gun was a gun and a shot was a shot and I didn't want to buck him.

"I didn't ask you that, Buzz," Honeydew went on. "But we weren't able to get Jebediah Oregon to talk. Clams up. Of course, we could try beating him up and getting his formula out of him that way." The smile was back. "You do know about his formula, don't you, Buzz?"

It was my turn to shrug. And I kept my mouth shut. Her smile vanished.

"Be a dumb-dumb, Buzz, but we're going to use you pretty good. You're going to get him to tell us the formula." She glanced at Fowler. "Now call Jebediah. Tell him Buzz Cardigan is waiting in his room—Room 460. Tell him Buzz wants to repeat the amorous experience they had together."

"There was no—" I began.

That damned shrug again. "Does he know that?" Honeydew asked. "We got him doped plenty. The poor geek never knows what's going on. We just tell him what happened, and he believes it. Gosh, Buzz, he even believes he's married to this slut."

She sighed deeply, looking down upon me as if from the heights of supreme majesty. This was a woman who had put something over on a man, namely me. Now, with Jebediah Oregon joining the party in my room, there was no telling what she had planned for me.

And just when I was wondering, there was a knock at the door.

Call it the knock of doom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

But the child that is born on the Sabbath day
is bonnie, blithe, and good and gay

1. Saturday, July 14, 2:05 a.m.; the Silver Truckee

LISTEN, I know Lake Tahoe and Reno and Las Vegas never close, that there is excitement around the clock. But does that have to hold for danger, too? Can't there be a holiday on death, not even for a little bit?

And can't there be a respite on the way of the queer, or the everlasting pursuit of depravity?

I sighed as Oscar, alias Jebediah Oregon, alias Lulu, came in the door. He was ten feet off the ground. They must have had him doped to the gills. He had eyes only for me. The others never existed.

"*Darling!*" he gushed. "I thought you'd *never* call!"

There were two guns aimed at me but he gave them no never-mind. "I'm *delighted* to see you!" he went on. "Shall we have right at it, lovely boy? Oh! Oh! I'm so *thrilled!* I'm trembling!"

So was I, buster, but not for the same reason.

"Cool it, J.O.!" snapped Honeydew.

It was as if he'd been struck by a lash. He never looked at her, but he wilted. And when Honeydew started talking to me, it was as though he did not hear a word of what she was saying. He just stood there, a lost dog's expression in his eyes.

"My crew and I have been on Jebediah's trail for a

long time, Buzz," she said. "We found him first, but you were here right after that. When I discovered you were here, I was pleased. You see, although we provided Jebediah with all sorts of sexual pleasantries, he just would not talk to us. The boys we got for him did not excite him enough for him to loosen up. It seems he's got some kind of thing for not telling anyone what he **knows.**"

I glanced at Jebediah. You would never know by looking at him that he was one of the foremost scientists of our time, a great talent abused because his sexual likes were not the norm. Someday civilization would come to its senses; then Jebediah and others like him would be accepted and there wouldn't be such a big damn fuss about them. And neither would there be the threat to a man's honor and a country's safety because of what people considered an aberration.

Meanwhile, all I could do was think a silent "Thank you" to the man who would not betray his country's secrets under any circumstances.

But Honeydew was still talking to me.

"He never showed any true emotion about a man until he met you. You see, we had him drugged and drunk when you and he went into that bedroom. And after you left, knowing he really had a thing for you, **we went even further.**"

Looking at me, Jebediah blinked, a zombie.

"We fed him LSD, no less. And we talked to him about you, about how wonderful you and he had been in bed. He got so excited, he wanted nothing else but to repeat the experience."

"You play dirty, Honeydew."

"We're in a dirty game, Buzz. And the prize is a big one, my world against yours. Nevertheless, Jebediah is now convinced that he is in love with you. He'll do anything to get into bed with you again—even to revealing his formula. Aren't you the lucky one!"

"Not so far. He went to great lengths to change his appearance, I notice. Was it your idea?"

"Nope, all his own, the dear thing. Went on a crash diet, shaved his head, put on a new and smaller set of dentures—you didn't know his other teeth were false, did you? He also stopped wearing the built-up shoes he'd always affected. And he changed the color of the contact lenses he wore. Darned clever of him, don't you think?"

"Very. How about her?" I indicated the lush woman who was gaping at the floor. Like Jebediah, she was out of it.

"That was my idea. Simply a front to throw you off, Buzz boy, to make you think Oscar was a married man while the real Oregon, of course, was a confirmed spinster. I thought at first I'd have to discourage you and get you away fast."

"So I noticed. Your boys tried to tie a can on me. You changed your mind fast about me."

"Only when you were the last hope I had of getting the formula out of Lulu here."

When he heard the name "Lulu," Jebediah perked up.

"Somebody call me?" he asked hopefully.

"Down, girl," commanded Honeydew. "Your time will come."

"The point, Honeydew," I said, "is that you can't force me to comply with your lustful little idea."

She laughed. "The point is, dear, that we don't have to do that. All we have to do is make Lulu think it'll be a fact and she'll come to heel. You see, she gets excited just at the idea of going to bed with you. You certainly have got what it takes, Buzz. I sense it, too. Too bad we couldn't work out an arrangement, just you and I. But that's out of the question now."

"But you're a virgin, Honeydew."

I threw that at her because I couldn't think of anything else. The result was astounding. Her face went pale un-

der the make-up, her eyes glared, her gun hand trembled.

"Who . . . who told you that?" she demanded.

"It's a fact, isn't it? There are people who've seen you around the gambling towns of Nevada, and they say you've never been to bed with a man."

"Shut up, Cardigan!" Oh, it was Cardigan now. No more Buzz. I mean that chick was mad clean through.

"Oh, now you cool it. I couldn't care less. I like my bedmates clean—if not pure—of mind and limb. I don't think you're that at all."

Her good humor, such as it was, had returned. A cruel smile played about her mouth. "Oh, you'd be surprised, lover. You'd really be surprised. If you only knew what a good bet you're missing. It might change your entire attitude on things."

"Well, since you put it that way, why don't you tuck away that nasty-looking gun, take off your clothes, and we'll have a session for, say, a week or so."

But she was not buying that one, you can be sure. She merely snickered at me. "All right, then," I said. "Now what?"

She merely turned to the dazed Oregon. Still looking at me with an evil twinkle in her eyes, she said to him, "Lulu darling, Buzz is simply dying to make love to you. He just told me."

Oregon clapped his hands. "Oh, how wonderful! I knew you could arrange it, Honeydew."

"Of course. But not here, sweetheart. Not at the lake. I have a lovely bridal suite arranged for the two of you at the best hotel in Carson City. Now, the bridal party will go there in separate cars. Because I'm the maid of honor, I'll go with you, the bride, of course. Gary Fowler is the best man, and he and Buzz will go in another car. Would you like that, dear?"

"A wedding party! What a *marvelous* idea! I'm *swooning!*"

Now Honeydew edged up to me.

"Get it, Buzz?"

"I'm afraid I do, Honeydew."

"While we're on our way to Carson City, Oregon will give me the formula. As soon as that's done, I'll kill him and dump his body off one of the cliffs. They won't find it unless they start excavating a million years from now. As for you . . ."

"Don't tell me, Honeydew. Let me guess. It'll be Gary's pleasure to knock me off right here."

"You and that awful woman. Never could stand that blowsy oversexed type anyway. Adios, Buzz. It's been an honor beating you at your own game."

She moved to the door with the happy Jebediah. Gary, his gun aimed at me dutifully, said to her, "Listen, I know a good road for you to take for your purpose. It's lonely, and no one drives it. Especially at night. The Kingsbury Grade. It's a killer in more ways than one."

"Good idea, Gary. I'll take it. You're really hitting on all cylinders lately, aren't you? See you keep it up."

"Oh, I will, dear; don't worry. I'll take care of these two easy as pie."

"Do that."

She and Jebediah were at the door. I couldn't resist trying to satisfy one curiosity about her.

"Honeydew, before you go," I said.

"Yes?" She blinked her eyes at me just as though she wasn't a coldblooded murderer.

"Answer one last question, will you?"

"I'll try, darling."

"Why do you call yourself Honeydew?"

She smiled and looked me up and down. Slowly. Then, just as slowly, she said in that sultry voice, "You ever taste honeydew, Buzz?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Too bad. And now you never will. You're missing a lot."

And she was gone. But I wasn't. And neither were Isabelle and Gary. Especially Gary. With that damned gun.

2. Saturday, July 14, 3:10 a.m.; the Silver Truckee

Somewhere the bands were playing, somewhere the girls were dancing. Somewhere there was happiness and laughter and all kinds of stuff like that there. But not in my room. There it was strictly Mudville.

How do you fight a guy with a nervous gun pointed at you? What skills do you use? What trickery, what strength? I couldn't think of a thing to do. He stayed a proper distance from me, and there was nothing handy I could toss at him. And, unlike that Englishman of spy fiction, I had no trick gadgets up my sleeve. Because, you see, I wasn't living fiction. This was for real. This was me, Burgess (Buzz) Cardigan, lovely and alive, about to be turned into a corpse. I had no Ian Fleming to make up freak escapes for me.

In other words, I was strictly on my own. What to do, what to do?

The broad was sprawled out in a chair and didn't know what planet she was on. Gary knew, however. And he knew he had a job to do. He was getting ready to do it, too. I could see him biting his lower lip and blinking his eyes to screw up the courage.

If he didn't come through, I had an idea that Honeydew would scratch him off her list of the living.

Another second or two and I'd be a goner.

And then I saw it. His eyes were going up and down my body in exactly the same way as Honeydew's. They were giving me the long, steady gaze of admiration, sizing up my body for sexual possibilities.

Being the kind of person he was—in short, a slave to his desires—he must have been thinking one thought:

"Isn't it a shame to have to kill off that lovely body?" But he was not going to delay the action. Honeydew's existense was more vital to him than mine.

So I did the only thing I could do. What was that? Why, I started to take off my clothes, of course. I started with my coat, then undid my tie.

Gary's eyes popped. I gazed steadily at him, hell, even pouting a little bit the way I'd seen strippers do it. That's right, gents, step right up and see her! Buzz Cardigan, lovely strip-tease artist, unveiling herself right before your naked eyes!

Gary's eyes bugged. His chest started to rise up and down. The gun hand shook more than ever. I had my shirt off now and was stripped to my manly chest. His eyes danced back and forth, and he licked his lips that had gone suddenly dry.

I got my hands down to the top of the fly of my pants.

The gun dropped.

"No! No!" he cried. "Let me!"

"Be my guest," I said.

He rushed at me, empty hands outstretched. The poor guy never made it. He ran into one fist and then into another. The first doubled him over, being pitched at the pit of his palpitating belly; the other, a haymaker from center field, put the kibosh on him. He flew backward, knocking over a small table and two chairs, and crashed against the wall.

I was upon him like a shot. I pulled him to his feet, gave him a right to his left temple and a left to his right. I believe in balancing these things out.

I held him up and watched his eyes. They were nothing but white. I let him drop and he went down like a sack of cement. Then I yanked off his tie and tied his hands behind him with it. Another tie, one I got from my closet, took care of his feet.

Then I shoved a handkerchief into his mouth and tied

that in with still another tie. I made sure that he was breathing all right. The guy's eight sinus cavities were clear and functioning. He'd last until I could get back to him.

I turned to the chick. "How you doing, Isabelle?" I asked.

She blinked her eyes. "Just fine, thank you." I don't know what they'd been feeding her, but it certainly had an effect. She reached one hand into her blouse and lifted out her left breast.

"Want some?" she asked demurely.

"Not just now, thanks. I was thinking, Isabelle, maybe you'd like to go down to the casino and play a little dice or something."

"Hmmmmm. You sure you don't want any? There's lots here."

"I see, I see. Some other time, Isabelle. Meanwhile, how's about some nice dicey-wicey, eh?"

"Anything you say, lover. Goddamn, you're good-looking!"

I had to move fast. All the while I was talking to Miss Breast Obsession, I was shoving her out of the room, into the hallway, and into the elevator. I trotted away from her when we reached the ground floor.

My car was far away at Carson River. I picked up a cab at the door and had the driver rush me fast as the law allowed—and faster, with a twenty-dollar bill to encourage him—to Lake Tahoe Airport.

I was in luck. Some kid in a Piper was about to take off for L.A. I handed him a hundred and asked him to take me on as a passenger for a fast hop to Genoa Airport, just a few short miles from the base of Kingsbury Grade.

I made it. The hop was heart-eating and I must have lost ten pounds. The kid pilot loved the idea of getting me to a place in a hurry, and he skimmed mountaintops and treetops to do it. But I made it.

At Genoa I was also in luck. A sleepy attendant rented me his Dodge—cash in advance, fifty bucks worth and all the identification I had.

Now, the night getting darker, I sped back to the base of Kingsbury Grade. I didn't dare think of what I had to do. I was like a soldier acting under orders while under fire. My moves were automatic by now.

But I did know one thing. I was scared. Of a little slip of a glamor girl. Sure, she had a gun. But I've faced others with guns. Big men, tough and hardened. I've been afraid of them, too, but not as much as I was of this one.

Why?

Hell, what do I know! All I know is that my stomach was churning with that sick feeling that said to me, "This is it, kid! This is the big time! This is it!"

I always talk to myself in affection and tenderness when I don't think I have a chance to live out the next five minutes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Where the wilde goose goes!

Saturday, July 14, 4:20 a.m.; Kingsbury Grade

I SKIDDED THE HEAP to a halt as I reached the narrow road, the one leading down Kingsbury Grade. I fixed it so that the car blocked at least half the road. I had also pulled it in at a crazy angle so that it looked as though there had been an accident.

Smart, eh? I didn't know; all I was doing was trying anything at all. I'd been lucky so far. Now if my luck would only hold . . .! If not . . .!

I threw the door open and flung myself out on the road, head down, face turned away from the road—and from the glare of headlights coming down the Grade. Now it looked as though I had been thrown out of the car and was out cold.

Still smart, right? There was only one hitch. What if Honeydew recognized me? As I lay there, waiting for the car to come down the road, I got the quakes. She could have recognized me through the suit I ws wearing. That was remote, of course, but it was a possibility.

One more hitch? What if she had already pumped Oregon, gotten the information out of him, killed him, and dumped his body off a cliff as she said she would do?

Brrrh! God, it was damn cold in the High Sierras!

I had grabbed the gun from the floor back at the hotel, of course. Now I had it in my hand and tucked under me. And I waited.

Sure, there could have been another car coming down the Grade to ruin everything for me. But that was the chance I had to take. Remember, I had my face turned away from the road. When a car came, I wouldn't know if it was the right one or not. Also, if Honeydew spotted that I was the guy lying across the road, she'd have the jump on me.

But otherwise, she had no way of knowing I was the one. There was just no ordinary chance of me getting from the hotel to this spot before she did. I said ordinary chance. The one I took was remote. But it worked. And as I lay there I prayed that the rest of it would work.

I didn't have to wait long to find out. The next few minutes went by like a flash.

I saw the glare of headlights reflecting off the road just after I heard the subdued roar of the motor. The lights came closer and closer, and then I heard the brakes screech. A car door opened and slammed, and a voice growled, "What the hell is this?"

Only the voice didn't say "hell" and it wasn't Honeydew's voice. Hell, I'd drawn a bad-luck card. This guy with the bass voice would certainly queer my setup, my well-calculated plan.

Then the same voice said, "Wait, Jebediah. Stay in the car, baby, till I can push this heap out of the way."

And at that, all the pieces fell into place.

The Daisy Dilemma was over.

"Goddamn accident," said the voice as it came closer.

I pretended to moan and turned my head toward my visitor. I saw that gorgeous silhouette against the glare of the headlights. That svelte, trim, small, luscious femininity came toward me. Only there was nothing female about the voice. It was all man, man!

Honeydew Demay, you see, was no lady.

Honeydew Demay was a transvestite, skilled to pass anywhere on earth as a woman, down to the figure, the grooming, the manner, and that amazing singing voice.

Not to mention all the feminine allurements she possessed.

I saw something else. That is, I did *not* see something else. She had no gun.

I got up and faced the damsel.

Her face went pale, and she started shaking. Then she started swearing. And I mean she knew an awful lot of words. She reviled me upside down and in and out. She cursed my ancestry back to Adam and Eve and my descendants down to the last survivor of the war of the future.

And all I did was grin.

When she ran out of curses, she flew at me. And this time there was nothing left of the woman part of her.

What did I do? Fellows, I beat the living hell out of her. It was a joy and a pleasure, one I shall relish to the end of my days. The character had fooled me completely, even into arousing my feelings toward him—as a woman, of course. So I had to make up for a lot of things before I turned him over to the more official dispensers of justice.

I'll spare you the details. Suffice it to say that I did a most thorough job. And when the guy was lying prone on the road, I picked him up and tossed him into the seat beside Jebediah who, fortunately, was still alive.

Then I lit a small fire beside the road, fired a few shots into the air, and waited for the police to come see what all the shooting was about.

Sunday, July 15, Noon, the Silver Truckee

The rest, as they love to say in the Department, was routine. The police came and I gave them the scam. They locked up Honeydew Demay, real name Mortimer Simms; they turned Jebediah over to the medics and picked up Gary Fowler and Isabelle.

The medical report informed you that Oregon's condition is not good. The poor guy is out of his mind and

will spend the rest of the few years he has left in an institution. The great thing, though, is that he never told the Enemy about his formula.

How could he? You see, the very drugs they were feeding him to keep him subdued so he would talk were what destroyed his mind and made him forget what he had discovered.

It had its tragedy, of course, but the total destruction of the formula is just what the United States wanted.

Ironic, what?

I'm rested up now and I spent the last few hours making up the finale of this report to you chaps. My job is done, right? Buzz Cardigan came through again, right?

Ta-ta, goodbye, adios, and *das vedania.*

I'm on my own, and where I'll be hiding out for at least a week will be where the best brains of the Department can't find me. And I won't come out until the lady screams "Enough!"

I'll give you a hint, however, as to where I'll be and with whom.

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